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Allegiances

SeasonClan

Leader: Stonestar - gray tom with amber eyes

Deputy: Iceflame - white she-cat with orangey patches and green eyes

Medicine cat: Dawnstream - bright orange she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Emupaw

Warriors: Flametail - red tom with yellow eyes

Ashdust - blackish-gray tom with amber eyes

Silkpelt - whitish-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Amberfire - orangey-red she-cat with green eyes

Stargleam - yellowish-golden she-cat with pale amber eyes

Graymist - gray she-cat with misty blue eyes

Echoheart - dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Riversong - gray-blue she-cat with dark blue eyes

Streamwhisker - silver she-cat with green eyes

Browntail - black tom with a brown tail and amber eyes

Leafshine - tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Woodfur - brown tom with amber eyes

Heathermist - pinkish-gray she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Littlepaw

Frogleap - grayish-green tom with amber eyes

Wormtail - brown tom with amber eyes

Spidertail - white-and-black tom with a tortoiseshell ear and brown eyes

Dogspring - brown tom with blue eyes

Spiketail - tortoiseshell tom with spiky fur and yellow eyes

Hollowmist - brown tom with yellow eyes

Sandwhisker - pale ginger tom with green eyes

Firespring - fire-colored tom with ginger patches and bright green eyes

Coriandermist - white she-cat with yellow eyes

apprentice, Minnowpaw

Lovegrass - gray she-cat with tortoiseshell spots and amber eyes

apprentice, Stormpaw

Joyspirit - golden she-cat with green eyes

Peacewind - white she-cat with purple eyes

Patienceheart - reddish-brown she-cat with sapphire eyes

Sunbright - bright yellow she-cat

Goldenwind - golden she-cat with green eyes

Appledawn - red she-cat with orangey splotches and green eyes

Cloudysky - gray-and-white tom with pale blue eyes

Apprentices: Emupaw - golden-brown she-cat with black spots and

blue eyes

Littlepaw - small black tom with gray eyes

Minnowpaw - gray she-cat with amber eyes

Stormpaw - silver she-cat with bright violet eyes (main character)

Queens: Shadowheart - mother to Firespring's kits: Mistkit, a gray she-cat, Sunnykit, a golden she-cat, Morningkit, a grayish-white tom, and Duskykit, a gray-and-black tom

Lightmist - mother to Hollowmist's kits: Swankit, a white she-cat, Duckkit, a pale yellow tom, and Fallowkit, a tortoiseshell she-cat

Ashenface - mother to Frogleap's kits: Darkkit, a black tom, Oakkit, a brown tom, and Lilykit, a pinkish-white she-cat

Starrynight - expecting Dogspring's kits

Wheatpelt - expecting Eagletail's kits

Elders: Pinkeyes - black tom with pinky eyes

Piketooth - brown tom with big teeth and amber eyes

Shinepelt - silver-white she-cat with blue eyes

Author's Note

Hi, this is Frostwind88! Thanks for picking my book to read! Thank you (if you read the allegiances) and sigh (if you skipped the allegiances)

Please comment!!

Chapter One

I bent down to the prey pile, my mouth salivating at the sight of delicious, juicy prey. I smacked my lips hungrily and reached out for one plump, tasty mouse that I had been eyeing. Suddenly, I could feel eyes boring into my neck. I looked around nervously and spotted my mentor, Lovegrass. What was wrong this time? With Lovegrass, you could never tell.

"You didn't hunt today," Lovegrass scolded disdainfully, eyeing the mouse at my paws. I had to push down a sudden flare of anger. Wasn't she the one who scheduled me for battle training the whole day? And now she expected me to go hunting as well? There were only twenty-four hours in a day!

"You made me do a full day of battle training," I protested. Lovegrass stared back at me flatly. Her eyes were merciless, and my expression turned grim. No way was I worming out of this one. I could see it in her eyes.

"The you hunt after battle training," Lovegrass scolded. "That is no excuse! I'll let you take that mouse today, but tomorrow you'll hunt for the Clan! And you'd better catch more than just one mouse for yourself!" She turned and stalked away.

"Okay," I mumbled. I so wanted to roll my eyes at Lovegrass, but that would get me a moon of cleaning out the elders' den, and I didn't want to do that. The elders were nice, admittedly, but their stories were boring and they never insulted anybody. Not that I did, but I liked it to have a bit of spice.

I didn't like my mentor. Lovegrass was... alright, admittedly, but slightly mean, and she hated me. Because... well, simply because her sister, Peacewind, was my mother.

Peacewind was a nice cat at heart, I supposed. But she'd had kits with a passing rogue, Root. Lovegrass had killed him. I'd never

known Root because Lovegrass killed him the moment my mother was visibly expecting. I hated Lovegrass for that, and she hated me for being the offspring of a rogue. Oddly, Lovegrass didn't hate my mother. That was weird. I'd rather she hated my mother, because she ignored me anyway. Thanks to her, I had no father.

I grabbed the mouse and sullenly retreated to the apprentices' den. I saw Minnowpaw edge away from me. Boy was it terrible to be the only child. I was the only daughter and child of Peacewind and Root, and that was just terrible. I couldn't rely on anyone. Peacewind wanted nothing to do with me – Lovegrass had probably made some sort of deal with her to be nice – and well, with no siblings to depend on, and Root dead, I was really, truly alone.

Littlepaw and Emupaw tried to be nice, but they were edgy around me. Not like I didn't expect them to be. The only cat really nice to me was the Clan deputy, Iceflame. She was Peacewind, Lovegrass, Joyspirit and Patienceheart's mother, the father being Stonestar, and she didn't agree with what Peacewind was doing. She was kind to me, at the very least. I'd expected that from Peacewind, not Iceflame, but Iceflame was like a mother to me. That, at the very least, was nice, although Iceflame had her moods and sometimes wasn't in the mood to be a mother. She was deputy and she had other responsibilities, and technically, I wasn't hers.

Suddenly, there were yowls from outside camp. Loud, distressed yowls. I snapped my head around. I had heard the sound before anyone else, and shortly after I had heard it, my Clanmates started to notice, too. Several rushed to the entrance, eyes worried. I waited at the side. No one would find pleasure in my presence anyway.

The evening patrol returned, only comprising of Echoheart, Riversong, Streamwhisker and Browntail. Before, Eagletail had also been with them. He was missing. Had a fox gotten him? I narrowed my eyes, trying to pick him out from among the cats but saw nobody.

"Where's Eagletail?" the worried exclamation came from Wheatpelt, Eagletail's mate. Echoheart faced the poor queen with a bleak expression. She looked as though she didn't know what to say, her

mouth opening and closing hopelessly without a word spoken.

"He went to become a kittypet." It was Riversong who answered, seeing as Echoheart was at a loss for words. She had stepped forward, stroking Echoheart with her tail.

"Again?!!" Furious yowls erupted from around the Clan. "We already lost Swiftflight, Blackstorm, Slystep, Flyflight, Dandelionwhisker, Squirrelleaf and Mothwind this moon! And Mallowbright, Stiltweaver and Fallowleaf in the moon before! And now Eagletail too?!! What's the joy in becoming a kittypet?" The last roar came from Iceflame. I had known my grandmother was fierce, but that angry? Well. I guess this wasn't a good day to tell Iceflame my woes and complain that Minnowpaw was ignoring me again. I mean, I knew she was kind of moody today, so I'd been debating whether to do so, but Eagletail's abandonment of his mate would cause a lot of work for Iceflame. In my mind, I debated on what to do. I didn't want to be around when Iceflame started yelling.

I took a long stroll out, trying to let Eagletail's news about becoming a kittypet when he had an expectant mate to care for slip from my mind. But it wouldn't, so I trudged back to camp to try and comfort Wheatpelt; I knew I'd fail miserably, but I had to try. There were probably already cats crowding Wheatpelt. My paws almost betrayed me and took me in the direction of the apprentices' den. It was painful, but I turned back to the nursery. My heart ached for the poor lonely queen, but t the same time, would she even want to see me? I was disliked by the Clan, an outcast. Trying to comfort her might only make her annoyed.

But when I got back, there weren't. Wheatpelt was alone next to the empty fresh-kill pile, her tail drooping miserably. She was pawing a piece of prey dully. She didn't look hungry at all, just lifeless.

She looked up when I came into view. "Stormpaw?" she asked curiously, although her curiosity did nothing to hide that she was still upset and sad about Eagletail leaving. The curious tone was in her voice, but also a rather dead, flat tone. It wasn't very encouraging, but I came forward anyway, nervous as I was.

"We're probably in the same situation, now," I meowed casually,

trying not to sound mean or superior. "You know... I don't have anyone either." The words came out choked and I realized I was close to tears. Was I crying over her lost mate? No; it was my own tragic life I was crying for. The life that had been thrown onto me. I'd never wanted to be ignored, never wanted to be looked down on, yet here I was.

I knew Wheatpelt's parents, Mousewind and Shallowstream, had died in a flood moons ago, and that Wheatpelt's sister, Whitewhisker, had died fighting a fox. Wheatpelt had probably really depended on Eagletail for support. And now... Now he was gone, and she hd nobody.

Wheatpelt's eyes fixed on me, and she nodded, staring off into the darkening sky. "I don't think he ever loved me," she murmured solemnly. She didn't seem to notice that she was confiding in the apprentice – worse, the apprentice no cat liked. Me. She just... Let her worries flow out into me. I shared her pain.

"He probably did," I whispered back, trying to be comforting enough to make sense. "Just not enough." Those weren't comforting words but I could see her expression changed a little. Slightly happier.

Wheatpelt turned back to me. "You're a good cat, Stormpaw," she meowed unexpectedly. "I'm at a loss why nobody likes you." With that, Wheatpelt turned and left, a smile on her face.

It was strangely easy to make her like me, which was odd because I'd been trying hard for moons to get anyone to even have a conversation with me. Not like she was having a conversation. She had kind of walked out on me. Still, she was my first friend in a while, and I was grateful for that.

But, despite my recent achievement, it was still late, so I went to the apprentices' den to get a good sleep. I noticed that my nest had been shifted so I was at the back of the den, nowhere near Minnowpaw, Littlepaw or Emupaw. Wow. So Littlepaw and Emupaw were finally showing that they didn't like me. Emupaw looked up when I entered and had the grace to look sheepish.

Not that I was bothered. I had been training for three moons by them already, and if they weren't warming up to me yet, they never would. I slept on my own, the cold of night chilling my bones. I watched my denmates huddle together, sharing warmth, and a pang of jealousy came over me. Why didn't they care about me like they cared for each other? I wasn't that bad. My father was a rogue, that was all.

It had literally reached moonhigh – and I was fast asleep – when Stonestar called a Clan meeting. That was very, very annoying, because Lovegrass would most certainly be expecting me for training at dawn tomorrow, and Lovegrass seemed to be able to function on no sleep at all. I was wondering why on earth Stonestar was calling a Clan meeting now.

It was late. So very late. And there, underneath the High Rock, stood Mistkit, Sunnykit, Morningkit and Duskykit, all looking rather bouncy and grouped together. Seriously? Stonestar made kits stay up that late? I was disappointed in my grandfather! Why wake us all up and make us lack sleep for a ceremony that could be held the next day?

"Firstly, we have two new warriors," Stonestar announced.

Really? Littlepaw and Minnowpaw hadn't boasted about it? I was shocked by that. I knew Emupaw wasn't one for boasting, but I'd thought Minnowpaw at least would have. Also, what? Littlepaw and Minnowpaw had been sleeping right before their warriors' ceremony? Minnowpaw at least should've been up bouncing.

"Littlepaw, Minnowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"We do!" the two siblings chorused together.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names. Littlepaw, from this moment onwards you shall be known as Littlecloud. Minnowpaw, from this moment onwards you will be known as Minnowpelt. StarClan welcomes you as full warriors of SeasonClan!"

Minnowpelt looked strong and confident, but there was clearly something Littlecloud wasn't saying. He was looking around nervously, his eyes everywhere except on his Clanmates and Clan leader.

"Um ... Stonestar?" the new warrior finally asked, his head low. His voice was soft and he sounded anxious.

"Yes?"

The whole Clan knew what might happen and feared the worst. It couldn't be.... Not again....

"I'm going to become a kittypet."

THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN EDITED ON MONDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Two

"What? No!" Sunbright and Spidertail cried. They were Littlecloud and Minnowtail's parents. Their faces were anguished as naturally, they did not want their son to go away. It was a shame, I thought. He was a brand new warrior and had just sworn his oath! Had his oath become meaningless?

"It's just – I can't stop thinking of her!" Littlecloud cried. "Hazelshade. She's a kittypet I met" He cut off, gulping nervously as he looked from his mother to his father. They both looked severely disappointed in him.

"Littlecloud, she's obviously a former SeasonClan warrior," Sunbright sighed. "Hazelshade is a warrior name! I know Hazelshade left, right after her warrior ceremony, the day you were born. Hazelshade is ten moons older than you, Littlecloud." She seemed to be hoping that the large age gap would make him think twice, but he was indifferent. If anything, he was enraged.

"I'm fine by that!" Littlecloud snapped. "I love her. I love her so much, and nothing or nobody is going to keep me from her." He held up his head stubbornly. I tried to give him a wink or something but he wasn't looking at me. Nobody was. I wanted to say goodbye to him but the words wouldn't come out of my throat. He'd never been kind to me, we had hardly ever spoken, and now he was going to be gone. I reigned in my emotions, as for some reason, I was feeling a deep sadness and regret. He had been a good apprentice and a quiet roommate so he had never made much noise. The den had been peaceful with him around.

Stonestar and Iceflame's eyes were extremely pained. Naturally, they didn't want to see their newest warrior gone. Sunbright was crying too, but they finally let Littlecloud go. Iceflame looked as frustrated as frustrated got and she stormed away, her eyes smoking with rage. I heard her mutter something about wasting his mentor's effort and time. Accurate, though. A kittypet would never need the skills of a warrior.

Most of the Clan was pretty sure they'd never see Littlecloud ever again. I was, too, although I could probably just pop by Twolegplace and see him. Not that I wanted to; what would we even talk about? I hardly knew him at all. And he hadn't exactly been friendly to me.

"Hazelshade," Iceflame muttered. "If she hadn't left, we'd have two more warriors." There was something more to Iceflame's voice. A bit more depth than when she spoke hatefully about Eagletail. There was something more there, a deep sadness that she wasn't showing on her face.

"Hazelshade is who?" I asked curiously. I'd never heard of this Hazelshade before she'd been brought up today, and she piqued my curiosity. Iceflame seemed to know her quite well.

Iceflame whipped around, any tinge of sadness quickly changing to righteous fury. "I don't have time for you now, Stormpaw!"

Feeling hurt, I ducked away. Maybe Iceflame wasn't as motherly as I'd thought her to be. She certainly wasn't kind when she was frustrated, not with Hazelshade. I couldn't help but think that something had gone on between Iceflame and Hazelshade, but I couldn't place it.

Then it hit me.

Was Hazelshade ... Iceflame's daughter?

In that case she would be my aunt. Littlecloud, who was my age, was mating with my aunt? Wow. Well, not assuming Hazelshade was Iceflame's daughter, because, well, Iceflame had been deputy for moons and she was too dedicated to have kits while doing that. That was SO WEIRD! I didn't want Littlecloud to mate with my aunt!

"Well, how does it feel?" the sneer came from Minnowpelt as she walked over. Her usual snark was back, huh? The moment she and I were alone?

"To what? That you're a warrior and I'm an apprentice?" I asked,

pretending to be clueless. I liked playing dumb around Minnowpelt. It made her feel superior, and then she left earlier.

"Duh," Minnowpelt responded with a smirk. She looked so overconfident, I wanted to punch her face and wipe that smirk off! But I kept my emotions under control and smiled pleasantly.

"Well," I answered, my reply carefully planned, "I won't have to stand vigil during the cold winter night. My vigil will be in spring."

"Lucky you," Minnowpelt snorted. "I'm still becoming a warrior earlier."

But I could tell I'd hit a nerve there, that my vigil would be better than hers. Minnowpelt whipped around and stomped off. It hit me that we would both be standing vigil alone. Minnowpelt should've stood vigil with Littlecloud and Emupaw, but Littlecloud had run off and Emupaw was the medicine cat apprentice. We were very similiar, her and me, but she had been so unfriendly that even though we could've been friends once, her attitude alone defeated that.

"Now, Mistkit, Sunnykit, Morningkit and Duskykit, step forward," Stonestar meowed, confidence in his voice.

All the kits did. Shadowheart and Firespring stood nearby, looking extremely proud of their kits. I just watched, my gaze hollow and solemn. I didn't really care about them becoming apprentices. After all, I couldn't be their mentor. I was still an apprentice myself. The only cat with me now closer to my age was Emupaw, and there was still a moon's gap.

"Mistpaw, your mentor will be Minnowpelt," Stonestar meowed.

Seriously? That energetic bubbly gray she-cat with the most boring cat in the Clan? Wow. Stonestar really had bad taste. Minnowpelt was not a good fit for Mistpaw. Although, to be honest, sometimes Mistpaw was nice and bubbly and sometimes she was boring, too. Maybe she was becoming boring as an apprentice. Well, then Stonestar had picked right.

"Sunnypaw, your mentor will be Sunbright."

Who is still grieving. Really great choice, Stonestar. I admire your opinion. I almost laughed at my own thoughts. It was really quite funny to judge Stonestar's choice of mentors. I hadn't gotten a good one either – Lovegrass and me really didn't go together.

"Morningpaw, your mentor will be Little – I mean, your mentor will be ... um ... Spidertail," Stonestar meowed, this time less confidently. He was smiling a bit too much now, as if to cover up for his stumble.

I couldn't believe he'd chosen both the grieving cats. Morningpaw had evidently been supposed to be Littlecloud's apprentice, but still. Both grieving cats? Sunbright and Spidertail? They wouldn't be able to train their apprentices properly through their grief! What a dumb choice! But I tried not to say anything. That would be childish of me and would get me into trouble.

"Duskypaw, your mentor will be Spiketail," Stonestar finished, shooting Duskypaw a weird look.

I wondered what that look was. Sympathy? He had literally assigned him Spiketail, so if he was feeling sympathetic ... I couldn't shake the feeling that my grandfather was suspicious, or should I say in my immature way, sus.

"Minnowpelt! Minnowpelt! Mistpaw! Sunnypaw! Morningpaw! Duskypaw! Mistpaw! Sunnypaw! Morningpaw! Duskypaw!"

I joined in the cheering, though halfheartedly. I noticed no one was cheering Littlecloud's name either. He hadn't quite left yet, and was still standing awkwardly at camp entrance after his blunder by wildly announcing his love for the former SeasonClan warrior, Hazelshade. Lovegrass might scold me about this later, but my mentor was woefully absent from the ceremony, despite the fact that Lightmist was apparently her best friend. I had no idea what Lightmist and any cat at all might see in Lovegrass, but if she claimed to know or be able to do something, I never questioned Lovegrass unless I wanted to be looking after elders for the next moon.

I sighed and got to bed. Perhaps Lovegrass was sleeping. I hoped she didn't make me get up at dawn the next day. I might not be able to survive the lack of sleep, especially since I had no one to complain to or depend on. Thanks a lot for ignoring me, Peacewind.

I woke up at sunrise the next day. Thankfully, Lovegrass wasn't around. I heard coughing from the medicine den and discovered Lovegrass and Minnowpelt coughing away inside. I entered the den, frowning. Was Lovegrass still going to take me training? I hoped with all my heart the answer was no. If there was no training, I would be free the whole day, or at least I would be training with someone else.

"Get out," Dawnstream meowed warily, shooing me with a paw. "They have greencough. Minnowpelt won't be able to train Mistpaw and Lovegrass won't be able to train you. Could you take over Mistpaw's training for now?"

"I'm an apprentice," I meowed bleakly.

"Just teach her the basics," Dawnstream responded. "I heard from Iceflame that you're very capable." Was she deliberately flattering me?

I thought if I could actually do it, I would be glowing at Dawnstream and Iceflame's praise. I agreed to train Mistpaw and hoped I wouldn't regret it. I probably would. Mistpaw was quite boring. I hoped she was in her bubbly mood today. If not, I wouldn't last.

"Mistpaw!" I prodded her. She was still sleeping soundly, snoring even.

Mistpaw rolled over. "It's early, Lightmist," she mumbled sleepily, stretching her paws up at the top of the den. She yawned hugely and made me want to spit in her face, but I refrained from doing so.

I rolled my eyes. "Mistpaw, you're an apprentice now! It's sunrise, get up." My patience was already waning.

Mistpaw stood up. "Stormpaw? I thought Minnowpelt – oh no, is

she waiting?" She suddenly looked frantic. That was the spirit an apprentice needed! But somehow, I was in no mood to smile.

I just shook my head. "No, Minnowpelt had greencough, probably from standing vigil last night. I'm taking you hunting, Lovegrass is sick too."

"I don't know how to hunt," Mistpaw mumbled sheepishly, although she should've known I'd know she couldn't hunt. No brand new apprentices could ever hunt!

"Then come on, let's learn," I responded, trying to sound cheerful. Then I remembered Mistpaw didn't know our territory. "You know, on second thought, we need to go on a tour of the territory."

"I don't have good stamina for walking," Mistpaw meowed, sheepish again, and quite shy.

"Well, you'll gain some today," I responded lightly. I wondered why Mistpaw was going on about the things she couldn't do. Normally, brand new apprentices went on about what they could do and exaggerated a lot.

Mistpaw followed me on the tour. Her sister and brothers were all going on separate tours and not together, so I led Mistpaw on my own. That was annoying. She was being boring today, so I'd hoped to saddle her with someone else.

"And this is the Great Sycamore," I meowed, a little too flatly. All my energy was wasted on talking! "We climb it for tree-climbing practice. That over there is the Great Oak – gatherings are held there. Nearby, past that snow pile, is the Grave of Fallowsong. I can't remember what she did, only she's important to us. You can ask the elders."

"Okay," meowed Mistpaw. She had never been energetic on this tour, but she was becoming less interested in my tour guiding. Was I that boring? Probably - I had no energy to be wasted on talking to apprentices such as she.

"I can hear the dawn patrol coming back," I meowed, after I caught

a familiar sound of pawsteps from quite some distance away.

"You do?" Mistpaw asked, shocked. "I don't hear a thing!"

"Well, they're over there," I pointed. Just beyond a very clumpy pile of snow was the dawn patrol.

"How do you see past that?" Mistpaw exclaimed.

"You just look!" I was starting to get annoyed now. How come Mistpaw couldn't see it? I could always see long distances clearly, and here Mistpaw was whining. So, so annoying. I really, really needed to ditch her somewhere.

"Does Lovegrass do this too?" Mistpaw asked quietly, sounding nervous. Finally, some emotion, but not good emotion.

"No," I meowed. "I mean, I'm sure she does, just ... we don't really talk. Ever."

"Okay, can we move on?" Mistpaw meowed, suddenly impatient. So, maybe she was interested in my tour! I wasn't such a boring tour guide after all!

"Wasn't Sunnypaw on the dawn patrol? Do you want to meet up with her?" I asked. I was getting kind of tired of Mistpaw and it would be nice to drop her off to Sunbright, even if she was getting interested now.

"No thanks." Mistpaw wrinkled her nose. "Sunnypaw stinks, and I don't like my siblings."

I'd known Sunnypaw had a natural aura of scent, but I hadn't found it stinky, not really. She smelled of rose, and it was a sweet, calming scent. I'd found her, as a kit, smelling nice. Now she would be mixed with forest scent, but still, she wouldn't be smelly. To be honest, Mistpaw was the one who was smelly.

Apparently, Mistpaw didn't feel the same way about her sister as me, the outsider. Oh well. If Mistpaw thought poorly about her siblings, I wasn't about to stop her.

I sighed. Secret plan to ditch Mistpaw? Failed. Always failing, my plans. That was one of the reason why no one liked me - I was so unreliable.

I took Mistpaw around the place to the training hollow, the dirtplace, the best areas for hunting, and finally brought her back. I expected to get scolded by Lovegrass, who would've miraculously recovered from greencough, but Lovegrass wasn't there, and neither was Minnowpelt.

"Hey – uh – why were you out with Mistpaw?" I heard the nervous tone of Firespring. What, did he think I'd hurt his daughter? What would I even gain from that? I didn't even want to bring the silly she-cat out and now I was getting scolded for it?

"Dawnstream set me to do it," I responded tartly. Like I'd wanted to bring out his whiny, annoying daughter! Who would? She was a stupid furball!

"Oh – uh – great," Firespring recovered quickly. "Uh – um – Mistpaw, do you ... uh ... want to see ... um ... Shadowheart?"

"Why?" Mistpaw asked. Firespring looked uncomfortable, and I sighed and walked off. It would've been nice to have a father, even an awkward one like Firespring. Instead, I got the deceased rogue for my father and boring Mistpaw got the awkward cat. Firespring was a father of two litters, but he was still kind of uncomfortable around his kits. What in the name of StarClan did Shadowheart see in him?

"Hey – um – Stormpaw!" I heard an excited voice. Duskypaw. Since when had I associated myself with him?

"Yes?" I asked the brand-new apprentice, in not a very receptive tone.

"I – uh – do you want to ... share prey?" Duskypaw asked shyly, half-staring at his paws and shooting nervous glances at me.

"No," I responded flatly. "Go share with Morningpaw or something." I spun around and left. I didn't have time for Duskypaw's antics, and

I didn't really want to share prey with the son of awkward Firespring. He could blame his father for that later. I picked up a shrew from the fresh-kill pile and sat down in a secluded corner to eat. Oops - I hadn't hunted today. But at least Lovegrass was sick. She would never know.

It didn't take long for Duskypaw to appear, plop down beside me and eat his mouse right next to my shrew. Sigh. Couldn't he get the message that I didn't want to eat with him? Who would, anyway?

I gobbled up my shrew and buried the bones before stalking off. What did Duskypaw think he was doing, stalking me? Did he like me or something? I didn't have time for measly apprentices! I stalked back to the apprentices' den before realizing it was only sunhigh. Really? Mistpaw's tour was that short? Now what was I going to do for the rest of the day?

And who was going to train me? I most certainly was not going to train Mistpaw! That would just be wasting my time. I went to find Goldenwind or Appledawn. The two she-cats were renowned fighters in the Clan. I spotted Appledawn over by the nursery, and I walked over to her.

"Could you do some battle training with me?" I asked her hopefully. I really hoped she was okay with me, and didn't hate me, because those cats who did would downright refuse.

Appledawn paused. "Alright, but I won't be fighting you, just reviewing your moves." She motioned to a rather large belly that I hadn't noticed before.

"Er ... congrats," I mumbled. Seriously? I should've picked Goldenwind ...

Appledawn beamed. "Thank you! We can head to the hollow right"

"No, you won't." Browntail had come over, and Appledawn sighed impatiently. "Goldenwind's near the elders' den, go train with her." He flicked his tail at me and smacked me in the eye.

"Ouch!" I squeaked, jumping back.

"Sorry," Browntail meowed, not sounding at all sorry, "but Appledawn's expecting kits. She's not doing battle training."

"Yeah, okay." I sighed and went to find Goldenwind near the elders' den, following Browntail's instructions.

Goldenwind was next to the warriors' den and not the elders', chatting eagerly with Sunbright, her sister, about Littlecloud and Sunnypaw.

"Um... Goldenwind? Could you do some battle training with me?" I asked quietly, averting Sunbright's gaze. Nope. This was not the cat I'd almost tried to dump Mistpaw on. Nope.

Goldenwind surveyed me for a moment, then meowed, "It's Stormpaw, right? Lovegrass' apprentice?"

"Yes, but I wish I wasn't," I meowed before I could stop myself.

Goldenwind laughed. "Believe me, I don't like Lovegrass either! She's an insufferable id"

"Shh!" Sunbright smacked Goldenwind with her tail. Goldenwind winced, then grinned back at Sunbright cheekily.

"I agree," I meowed quietly, and Goldenwind laughed again.

"See, Sunbright? I'm not the only one! Name one cat who likes Lovegrass."

Sunbright pursed her lips and I tried not to laugh. "Lightmist," she finally managed.

"Likes?" Goldenwind cocked her head.

"Yes likes!" Sunbright snapped.

"I meant, like, haha, romantically?"

"Uh ... Spiky?" Sunbright offered, then clamped her paw over her mouth, looking horrified.

"Who's Spiky?"

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Chapter Three

Sunbright was frozen, her jovial smile flat and emotionless. Her breaths came in rasping gasps and the way she stared at us made us feel like mouse-brained fools. Her mouth opened and closed, and she was in a state of shock.

"Lovegrass has been seeing a kittypet," Sunbright explained softly. Her eyes flickered from Goldenwind to me and back again. "I thought everyone knew. Spiky is a kittypet, a feisty one too. Lovegrass.... I think she likes him. And she went out to see him last night. She came back sick. The cold air, probably."

I just stared. Lovegrass. After telling me how she despised kittypets ... she was seeing one herself? Just ... just like Littlecloud. A traitor. Lovegrass was a traitor to SeasonClan, and I'd never known it until now.

Suddenly, I heard soft movement in the brambles behind us. My ears perked immediately. I could hear the newcomer, but I couldn't tell who it was.

"Someone's there!" I warned in a low hiss. I edged towards the brambles and pried them apart.

Peacewind. My mother. Of all the times! Why couldn't she leave me alone?

After everything she'd done, as if that wasn't enough, Peacewind was also eavesdropping on my life? "What are you doing?" I hissed angrily. Peacewind had abandoned me my whole life. I didn't need her now, no matter what she had to say. Even if she was expecting more kits. Bleh. I didn't need siblings. I was fine alone.

"I wanted to apologize..." Peacewind meowed quietly. She sounded nervous and her eyes were anywhere but on me.

Those words. I wanted to hear those words for the first six moons of

my life, I wanted to hear that my mother loved me.

But not anymore.

I. Didn't. Care. About. Her. Anymore. I didn't want her anymore. I realized she'd left me way too long of my life. I didn't need her, I didn't want her. So, no matter how sorry she finally was, she was too late to be my mother. Way, way too late. She should've told me this when I was a kit, when I was way more forgiving.

"Apology refused." I brushed her off. "Goldenwind, are we training?"

Goldenwind sprung to her feet. "Of course!"

I ran off with Goldenwind to the training hollow, trying to ignore the pained eyes of Peacewind burning into my back. Peacewind had ignored me my entire life, and I most definitely had no use for her anymore. I'd grown used to life without a mother. Life with an absent mother. Besides, Iceflame had probably asked her to apologize. It was nothing about her own initiative being taken. I was bitter, and I wanted nothing to do with her.

I mastered extremely hard techniques with Goldenwind that afternoon, like the back kick. There was also an odd one I hadn't mastered yet: Swiping up with the front paw, following with a back kick to the cat behind me, and then spinning around, finishing off the back person and re-attacking the first, who had been winded by my first attack. Goldenwind said I would need at least two training partners to practice that move properly, but that I could try practicing on my own first. I really wished Goldenwind was my mentor and not Lovegrass, all Lovegrass ever taught me was to do with the front paws. She said I wasn't ready for anything else.

"Seeya, Goldenwind!" I called happily at sunset.

Goldenwind smiled wryly. "We're not saying bye yet! You have to hunt your meal."

I gawked. "It's winter!" I protested. "I could be out for ages!" Goldenwind was just like Lovegrass!

Goldenwind shrugged. "Catch a piece of prey and go back. You'll

share that with Mistpaw, no matter the size. Good luck for you if it's big, bad luck if it's small."

Sighing, I carefully stalked anything that came to me. I had luck. I spotted three mice in a burrow. It apparently was a dead end in that burrow and I managed to catch all three of them. They were scrawny, admittedly, but one would be enough for me. Not for Mistpaw, though. I just sighed. Mistpaw hadn't caught anything and that wasn't my problem. What you catch, you get to eat, Lovegrass always said. For once, I would use her teaching to my advantage.

I craved all three mice. It would make me full. But I knew the queens needed it more. I brought the three mice back to camp and sighed. I gave them all to the queens, knowing they would really need it.

"You didn't catch anything?" Goldenwind meowed, sounding shocked. I was known for being the best hunter out of the apprentices, so this must've come as a shock.

"Three mice," I meowed. "I gave them all to the queens." I lifted my head high, proud of my act.

Goldenwind frowned. "Then you and Mistpaw won't get anything."

"It's alright." I closed my eyes and turned back to the apprentices' den.

"Eat this." She nudged me a scrawny rabbit. "Share it with Mistpaw?"

"I'll share it with Wheatpelt," I meowed, grabbing the rabbit and going to the nursery.

Wheatpelt had already demolished one of the mice, but I knew it wasn't enough. I plopped down the rabbit beside her. I paused for a moment, before taking a bite and pushing it to her.

"Want some?" I offered.

Wheatpelt narrowed her eyes. "Have you eaten?" Her eyes were narrowed, but she sounded concerned, almost in a motherly way.

"I'll eat after you," I meowed, shoving the rabbit to her.

Wheatpelt took a few small bites of the rabbit and pushed it to me. "I'm full," she meowed. I knew she was probably lying, but I was starving, so ...

The scrawny rabbit was gone in a few mouthfuls, and I didn't feel full. Wheatpelt heard my stomach rumble, ignoring her own, and looked back at me.

"You should've eaten the whole thing," she murmured softly.

"I can't," I meowed. "You don't have anyone to look after you, or bring you prey. If the apprentices don't do it, how will you survive?"

There was a small, faint smile on Wheatpelt's face. Then she sighed. "I hope Eagletail will come back when his kits are born..." She stared at her extremely rounded belly with a cloudy expression. She was probably due to kit any day now, but showed no signs of excitement.

"I'm sure they'll ... um ... look cute," I meowed, unsure of what to say. It was not like I ever wanted to become a mother myself. We also had too many queens. Appledawn, Starrynight, Wheatpelt, Shadowheart and Ashenface.

I didn't know where Eagletail had apparently become a kittypet, but I knew the area the dawn patrol patrolled. So, I went there and saw the strip of Twoleg nests. They were so big, and they looked warm. I could tell why they would be enticing during leaf-bare, but still. It was so wrong of Eagletail to do that! He should've brought Wheatpelt if he was set on it.

I saw him. I saw Eagletail. Sitting ... proudly on the fence. I wanted to scream at him, tell him he'd abandoned his mate in a time of need. While the Clan went hungry, he was filling himself up with kittypet slop. Kittypet slop, instead of catching real food for his Clan and making sure no cat went hungry.

"Eagletail!" I yowled loudly.

He turned. His eyes narrowed when he saw me. "Stormpaw," he

stated flatly.

"Yes," I said. "I've come to ask why you left."

Eagletail shrugged. "It's a long story." He didn't look like he wanted to tell me.

"I want to hear it," I snarled threateningly. I saw Eagletail's plump belly – how was he already plump? Had he been accepting food from Twolegs for a long time? Also – plump during winter??

Eagletail sighed. "Well, um ... my parents, Ashdust and Silkpelt, approved of Wheatpelt, who is Flametail and Stargleam's daughter – but I think you know her. So, um, I mated with Wheatpelt because she was kinda admirable. But then, you know, I walked across this very fence and the Twoleg offered me food. I thought it would be revolting, but I tried some and it tasted really good, and I was hungry, it is winter you know – so I came back for more. Eventually, after a day or two of coming every meal, I met the cat who lived there. Her name is Kyla. I, um, I fell in love with Kyla. So ... when she found out she was already expecting, and almost ready to give birth – I have no idea how Kyla didn't notice for so long – she fled to SeasonClan territory, thinking she had no choice. She wanted to be with me.

"I saw her, that day, while on the dawn patrol. I told Kyla to hide, and she did. Then I told the other members that I was going to become a kittypet. I came here. The moment we got back, Kyla kitted and the Twolegs were out."

Deep sadness crossed Eagletail's face, and I knew what had happened.

"They died?" I guessed, trying my best so sound sympathetic.

Eagletail nodded, solemness in his tone as he answered, "I wanted to get a medicine cat, but Kyla didn't want me to leave her. So ... we lost our kits. Minty and Kiki. I couldn't leave Kyla after that, she was devastated. She wants more kits, and I want them too. I'm sorry if Wheatpelt's sad, but really, I never loved her."

"You promised to stay with her," I whispered hoarsely. Wheatpelt had been so convinced that Eagletail loved her! This would come as a shock. A very big shock, and Wheatpelt would never be the same again.

Eagletail sighed. I did see regret shining in his eyes. "I did," he murmured softly, regretfully, bashfully. "I ... I'm sorry. But I love Kyla."

I nodded in acceptance, sadly. If it was true that Ashdust and Silkpelt had forced him to mate with Wheatpelt, then really, I couldn't blame him for falling for Kyla. It was only natural that he might love another cat. I sighed and walked home. Wheatpelt was not going to like my story. At. All. I also hoped I wouldn't get in trouble for going out without permission. For some reason, I was selfishly hoping that Lovegrass still had greencough.

I reached camp and saw the clearing in the middle of camp crowded. That only happened on one occasion.

Either there was a ceremony, or there was a death.

And since Lightmist's kits weren't near becoming apprentices ...

I wondered who died, Minnowpelt or Lovegrass. I really didn't care. I stared through the crowd – I wasn't sure how I could do that, but I did – and saw Lovegrass' limp body. Standing around her were Stonestar, Iceflame, Peacewind, Patienceheart and Joyspirit. I knew I should be there. After all, Lovegrass was my mentor. But I had no bond with her. I hated Lovegrass.

"Starrynight's kitting early!"

I heard that yowl. I wasn't very surprised. Starrynight might not have been expecting for three moons yet, but she was bigger than Wheatpelt.

Dawnstream and Emupaw instantly went to the nursery. I saw them shoo Wheatpelt out. Then, Wheatpelt looked at me, eyes narrowed questioningly.

Oh. Did she know where I'd gone? I'd dropped heavy hints last

night, but I'd thought she wouldn't notice. Well, maybe she had. I watched as Wheatpelt made her way slowly towards me, then realized she was heavily expecting and shouldn't be walking at all. I ran over.

"Yes?" I asked Wheatpelt.

"Why aren't you with them?" Wheatpelt asked softly.

I stared at her in confusion. "With who?"

"They're mourning Lovegrass," Wheatpelt meowed softly. "Why aren't you there? She was your mentor."

"I didn't like her," I admitted. Wheatpelt nodded. She knew that translated to 'I hated her!'.

"What did you do when you left camp?" she then asked curiously.

"You were awake?" I mumbled. I hadn't thought Wheatpelt would wake up at dawn!

Wheatpelt nodded, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Um..." I sighed. This was going to be tough. I knew it would be, and my original plan had been to bring Eagletail back to explain to Wheatpelt, but ... nothing had gone according to plan. I'd thought Eagletail preferred kittypet life to Wheatpelt, but really, the truth was way different. "I went to see Eagletail."

"Did he say anything about me?" Wheatpelt asked excitedly, suddenly all bouncy and energetic at the prospect of her mate.

My gaze dropped, and Wheatpelt's eyes softened.

"I mean, if he didn't, that's okay," she murmured, almost forlornly.

"He did," I clarified. "But you're not going to like it."

Wheatpelt's eyes narrowed to slits. "Tell me." There was a ferocity to her voice that I hadn't heard before, and she sounded way angry. I had known this was going to happen, and telling her was going to

be hard.

"He fell in love with another cat," I meowed. "I'm sorry, Wheatpelt. But he never loved you. He only mated with you because Ashdust and Silkpelt liked Flametail and Stargleam. Or they approved of you. And ... um ... he found out this kittypet he'd been seeing – Kyla – was heavily expecting. That day he found out, he went to stay with her. Their kits all died, so he's definitely staying there permanently. With her."

Wheatpelt's eyes clouded. She was definitely bottling up with anger but didn't want to say so or bother me. I was grateful for that – Wheatpelt was normally quite gentle, I didn't want her anger on me. Finally, she turned away.

"Thanks for telling me," she meowed softly, her anguished voice showing she was anything but grateful.

"It's ... Wheatpelt, I'll help you raise your kits!" I blurted. "I know I'm still an apprentice, but I'll come and help..."

"Thank you, Stormpaw," Wheatpelt meowed warmly. "Should we see if Starrynight's kitted?"

I didn't like the pointed change in subject, and she was acting suspiciously. But, thinking of the cute newborns, I couldn't help but nod.

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Chapter Four

I was elated to find out that Starrynight had kitted after all. She had two gorgeous little kitties, their names being Honeykit and Hivekit. They were adorable, their eyes closed, sleeping peacefully. Their mother gazed at them with love.

Honeykit was a beautiful dazzling golden she-cat with fur that seemed to shimmer. She moved, and her fur rippled beautifully. She was going to be a subject for toms later in her life, I was sure. She was just too pretty. She'd probably have lots of toms padding after her in the near future, so it would be a shame if she became a medicine cat.

Hivekit, on the other hand, was a bit darker than her, golden-brown like Emuwing, with long paws that would be good for walking. The tips of his ears were white and seemed to glow too. I wasn't sure what his eyes were yet, but all of his colors were pointing to blue or amber.

I could see it in Dogspring's eyes. Bright, radiant love. He'd always been an annoying warrior, but I supposed he loved his kits dearly. I supposed that was okay. Dogspring had never seemed like a kind cat, but I'd never seen him with Starrynight anyway. Maybe they liked each other in their own way, and he was really kind to her. I hoped he was. If he was like Eagletail and Wheatpelt, only to abandon her later.... I shuddered, not wanting to think about that.

I went on a hunting patrol with Duskypaw, Spiketail, Sunbright, and Sunnypaw. Two brand new apprentices with barely a day of training. Well, woe to me. I wanted to hit Iceflame for assigning me to a patrol with the most boring cats ever, but I could hardly hit the deputy, not to mention she was my grandmother. So I put up with their nonsense.

"Stormpaw, I guess Stonestar will give you a new mentor soon," Sunbright meowed gravely. "I hope Minnowpelt doesn't die too."

Oh, right. I'd forgotten she and Spidertail were Minnowpelt's parents, as well as Littlecloud's. Strange of me to forget, but I wasn't someone with very good memory.

"Y... er... yeah, me too," I agreed, hoping there was some sincerity in my voice. Mistpaw was training with Morningpaw under Spidertail at the moment, but if Minnowpelt died ...

I decided to focus on hunting prey since my mind was meandering. I managed to spot a mouse in the distance, and gave chase before finally pouncing on it and killing it. It was scrawny, as most prey was nowadays, but I found I wasn't particularly hungry. How come I wasn't starving? I suddenly realized. Out of all my catches, I always filled myself with one piece of prey. Everyone else must be hungry! I felt so remorseful. I picked up my mouse and scouted for more. I guess I shouldn't eat today.

I almost caught a rabbit but it scampered into Sunnypaw's claws and she claimed the credit. I just scowled, and snatched it from her. It was my prey, after all. She just happened to be walking by.

"Hey!" said Sunnypaw indignantly.

"It's my catch," I snarled. "You might have dealt the killing blow, but I would've too. It's mine. You can't take credit."

There was anguish in Sunnypaw's eyes. "But I haven't caught anything yet!"

"Then catch something! You're a brand new apprentice, you don't have to catch anything anyway! We just waste our food on you!" I snapped, picking up the rabbit and the mouse and padding back to Sunbright and Spiketail. Duskypaw and Sunnypaw were still hunting, but they returned empty-pawed. Spiketail lost the squirrel he was chasing when it scampered into a rabbit burrow.

"All the catches today were yours," Sunbright meowed, impressed, to me. "Good job, Stormpaw!" She smiled at me, though it was barely clouded by the sadness she was obviously still feeling - disappointment in herself, and wondering about her daughter.

Sunnypaw stared back at me, eyes narrowed. She almost looked jealous, but she had that expectant look to her.

"Well, I team-hunted with Sunnypaw for the rabbit," I finally allowed. "I chased it to her and she caught it."

"Good job, Sunnypaw!" Sunbright praised. Sunnypaw looked at me with gratitude in her eyes.

"That's all, I believe," Spiketail meowed, already looking back at camp. "Duskypaw, Sunnypaw, you getting back? Oh, Stormpaw, by the way, I heard Stonestar is announcing your new mentor. It might be Iceflame."

"Shouldn't be, she's my grandmother," I responded. "And we're awfully close, so that wouldn't work."

"'Close', you say," Spiketail snorted. "I'm pretty sure Iceflame tells you close to nothing, Stormpaw. Don't say you're close."

"Close, not tell-you-everything-we-are-besties close," I snorted unhappily. It wasn't very nice to be patrolling with a grumpy cat like Spiketail. Suddenly, I kind of pitied Duskypaw. He had a grumpy furball for a mentor.

"Well, who do you think, then?" Spiketail challenged. "It's not impossible. Your mother is Peacewind and Lovegrass is her sister, so technically, you were mentored by your aunt. Why should your grandmother be any different?"

"Let's remember that Iceflame is ancient and also the deputy," I replied, a twinkle in my eyes. "That's the difference."

Spiketail scowled. "You're insulting me by saying Iceflame is ancient. You do know I'm Iceflame's brother, right?"

I paused mid-step, staring blankly back at Spiketail. "You're my granduncle?" I asked it in a disbelieving tone, because, really, I'd never realized I could possibly have an uncle, after all this time of not having one. Spiketail had been pretty much nonexistent in my life. I'd never thought I'd be related to someone like him! What a grump!

Spiketail rolled his eyes. "Judging by your expression, you did not know. Yes, I am Iceflame's brother and your granduncle."

"Enough chatter back there!" Sunbright's call sounded.

I stuck out my tongue at Spiketail and hurried after Sunbright and Sunnypaw. Spiketail and Duskypaw lagged behind, Spiketail scolding Duskypaw about his hunting technique. I had the rabbit and mouse in my mouth. Despite giving half the credit to Sunnypaw, if she hadn't been there, it would've been my prey, so I was bringing it back to camp, and everyone would see me carry it. I was probably boastful that way, but, I wasn't about to let Sunnypaw steal the credit for pouncing on my prey.

I saw past the bushes and smelled the deep scent of fox. "Fox!" I yowled.

"Whoa, whoa!" meowed Sunbright. "I don't smell any fox!"

"I do!" I responded. "It's everywhere! And the fox is a few bushes away!"

"How do you tell?" Spiketail demanded. "Those bushes are so thick I can't see"

"I do smell fox now," Sunbright meowed, shivering slightly. "Sunnypaw, Duskypaw, Stormpaw, quick, go back to camp!"

"There's no way I'm leaving when there's a battle to be fought, and I can't just leave you here to fight!" I narrowed my eyes at where the fox was going to pop up from at any moment. I could see it crouching in the bush, ready to spring. Its hind legs were lowered. It was going to spring high, when it did.

"Stormpaw, you're an apprentice! And not a very experienced one at that! You still have one moon of training or so!"

"Apprentices have fought before!" I hollered. "Okay! Sunnypaw, Duskypaw, back to camp and get reinforcements!"

The two younger apprentices gave me one frightened look and scurried away. Sunbright gave me a disapproving stare - perhaps

because I'd ignored her order - and the three of us attacked the fox. It seemed hungry, as hungry as hungry got, an attacked us with much ferocity. I could practically hear the wind moving with every strike of the fox's claws. I dodged it nimbly, swiping at its ears and eyes. Enraged, it turned for me, claws outstretched.

I saw beyond it, a bramble bush. If I could push the fox there, it would be yipping pitifully and would definitely be stuck. The brambles would also pierce its fur to its skin and make it bleed. I ran, towards the bramble bush. As I expected, the fox gave chase, and eventually we were there. I vaulted over the bramble bush and made it to the Great Oak before turning back. The fox was caught in the bush, but I saw beyond it. Sunbright and Spiketail, collapsed on the ground, blood pooling around them. Had they really almost died while I was fighting the fox? I ran back.

"G... good job," Sunbright meowed weakly. "Finish ... it off ... won't you?"

I obliged. It was just one slash of my claw, anyway. The fox completely keeled over into the bramble bush.

Spiketail lay unmoving.

"Is he alright?" I murmured softly, with concern in my voice.

Sunbright stared at him, then meowed even more softly, "I have a feeling more than one apprentice will be changing mentor when we get back to camp..."

"But... Spiketail just got Duskypaw!" I protested. "Wake up, Spiketail." He was grumpy, but I'd never hated him. At least, I didn't think I had. He was old, with wisdom to share. He could've had a life in the elders' den, grumpily telling stories to bouncy new apprentices. Although, he would've had quite the temper!

"He's dead, Stormpaw," came Sunbright's quiet reply.

I stared back, then nodded. "Okay." I wasn't sad, not really, because I hadn't really known him.

We trudged back to camp. The mouse and rabbit seemed to weigh a

lot more than they had. As we were walking back to camp, carrying Spiketail's body between us, we encountered Spidertail, Iceflame, Flametail, Ashdust and Amberfire.

"Oh, hey you guys!" Amberfire meowed enthusiastically. "Did you get rid of the fox? I thought you would, but" Her talking stopped, her mouth opening and closing, as she spotted Spiketail's body between us. "No..." she whispered softly. "Not him."

"Did you know him well?" Iceflame asked curiously, as she bent over Spiketail's body.

I knew why she was asking. I'd never really seen Amberfire and Spiketail together, plus Spiketail was ancient. Amberfire had apparently been found as a lost newborn kit. Wait ... no ... it couldn't be ...

"He was my father," Amberfire meowed softly, touching her nose to Spiketail's spiky fur. Tears slowly rolled down her cheeks, and her breathing was coming in shallow breaths.

"No way," Iceflame and me breathed at the same time. Iceflame looked at me in some surprise, and I ducked away. "But then, Amberfire," Iceflame continued softly, "who is your mother?"

I stared back expectantly at Amberfire, but she seemed to shrink under the weight of our prying eyes. "I ... I can't say," the orangey-red she-cat meowed, her emerald-green eyes widening with fear. "I ... I just can't say."

I suddenly realized. Only a few types of cats would hide their parents. If their parent had cheated on their real mate, or ... when they were a medicine cat, and weren't allowed to have kits even if they wanted to.

"Your mother's Dawnstream, isn't she?" I meowed suddenly and softly, my voice low and challenging.

"Stormpaw!" Iceflame snapped. "I'm astounded you'd think such a thing! Dawnstream is a loyal medicine cat!"

"So loyal she gave up her own kit," I nodded. "But I'm right, aren't

I?" I turned back to Amberfire, my eyes narrowing. "Dawnstream's your mother, isn't she?"

I saw Sunbright, Spidertail, Ashdust and Flametail crowd around for the answer. Amberfire looked intimidated, but she went on, her voice shaking.

"Yes ... that's true," Amberfire admitted. "Dawnstream's my mother. But please, don't tell the whole Clan!" Amberfire begged. "We can't do that ... SeasonClan's already so broken..."

I heard something in the bushes, like a cat tiptoeing away. Without a second thought, I pounced on the wriggling bush. Iceflame, Amberfire and their entire patrol along with Sunbright stared at me in surprise.

Wriggling under my paws, her face alight with fear, was Dawnstream.

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Chapter Five

"Dawnstream?" Iceflame choked. "You heard everything?" Her eyes had widened when I had attacked Dawnstream rather unceremoniously. She obviously thought that what I had done was wrong, but her eyes were also narrowed suspiciously, like she wasn't sure what to think of the medicine cat anymore.

Dawnstream's eyes immediately narrowed at Amberfire. "You promised, my daughter. You promised not to say anything!" She spoke accusingly, and Amberfire quailed under her angry gaze.

"Forgive me, mother!" Amberfire cried, anguished. "Spiketail just died, and I didn't know what to do, in... In my grieving, I couldn't help but say..."

"What? Spiketail!" Dawnstream didn't even let her daughter finish before charging over to her mate's limp body. She buried her nose in his fur, sobbing quietly. "Why? Why, StarClan? He never did anything wrong..." she whimpered softly.

"You're going to have to stop being a medicine cat, Dawnstream." Iceflame's eyes narrowed. She looked extremely unhappily and unsympathetic.

"I'm actually fine with that," Dawnstream bit back tears, and I felt some sympathy for her. This cat had just lost a loved one, her mate that she'd never got to live with due to her position in life. "A life without Spiketail is not worth living." And, despite the fact that her sole child, her only daughter, was standing right in front of her, Dawnstream ripped open her own throat and collapsed, writhing in pain, to the ground. But then she stopped, her eyes glazed, and everyone knew she was dead.

"My mother," Amberfire choked. "Why? I lost my father today. I didn't want to lose her too!" She crouched beside her mother's body, weeping uncontrollably. "She never cared much for her life," the orangey-red she-cat choked out. "It was all about Spiketail,

everything. Without him, Dawnstream would have let herself go a long time ago."

I watched Amberfire cry, but my sympathy had gone. At least her father had not been a rogue, killed by her aunt. She had never suffered like I had. Spiketail had died a real death and Dawnstream had chosen what death she wanted. They had had the choice! And her parents had loved her. They hadn't abandoned her like my mother had.

Then again, that wasn't strictly true. Peacewind had tried to apologize, only I'd turned her down, not wanting anything to do with the mother who had been absent for most of my life.

Not that I had wanted to hear her apologies anyway.

"Let's get back to camp," I meowed. "Shouldn't we, Iceflame?" I added, suddenly remembering I had no authority here. But, despite that, I added, "And toughen up, Amberfire. You're a warrior."

Amberfire glared straight at me. "What do you know?" she hissed angrily, spitting. "Your father didn't – I mean, your mother didn't die!"

"Oh, really?" I curled my lip. "What do you think's better, a dead mother or a mother who doesn't care at all about you?" I spoke so bitterly, I even felt the bitterness in my heart.

Amberfire's eyes widened as my words registered to her. "I'm sure that's not – I mean, I'm sure Peacewind loves you in her own"

But suddenly, I felt so remorseful. Amberfire was blinded by sadness, she couldn't think straight.

"I'm sorry, Amberfire," I meowed, my heart aching for the orangey-red she-cat. "I know you're grieving, and I'm sorry I don't understand. Sorry for telling you to toughen up."

Amberfire looked at me. "But you're right, you know," she meowed softly. "You're totally right."

I shook my head. "It isn't my place to judge you," I responded, my

head low.

"Hey, hurry up, you two! Quit lollygagging and dawdling!"

I jumped, whipping around. I hadn't realized the patrol had left. Sunbright was looking back, an annoyed expression on her face. I nudged Amberfire and both of us trudged after the patrol. Flametail and Ashdust were carrying Dawnstream's body, since Flametail was her brother, and Spidertail and Iceflame were carrying Spiketail's body. I suddenly remembered no one had retrieved the fox I'd killed.

"Do we eat fox?" I asked Amberfire.

The orangey-red warrior cocked her head. "I don't think so," she replied uncertainly. "Why?"

"I mean, I did kill one," I chuckled, almost to myself, but I was surprised to see Amberfire was smiling.

"Tell me about it," she meowed. "I'm sure you had a pretty sweet plan!"

"I made it up on the spot!" I responded with a laugh.

I went into a detailed description of the fox fight, all the while listening absent-mindedly to the chirping of birds and rustles in the undergrowth. I mumbled my story around the rabbit and mouse and Amberfire took the rabbit from me.

"Oh, hey, how did all this earth appear out of nowhere?" Amberfire suddenly asked.

"What?" I said.

"It was winter!" Amberfire exclaimed. "Then there are trees, and that bramble bush? How in the name of STARCLAN?"

"Amberfire!" Iceflame scolded from the front.

"The trees, Iceflame! The leaves, the plants-!"

"Quiet!" Spidertail hushed. "It's normal! After all, it's spring!"

Amberfire argued. "For that to happen overnight-!!"

"Drop it," I meowed firmly. I didn't know how the sudden spring had come either, but I didn't want to cause Amberfire any trouble. Besides, it was probably StarClan's way of telling us they didn't want any of us to die this winter.

~

I gulped down a scrawny mouse despite there being rich, plump prey in the pile for me to choose. After all, I'd eaten prey every day during winter, and some hadn't. Didn't they deserve the plump prey that was now available?

Duskypaw watched me with a worried expression, but I shrugged his worries away. What did I gain from telling him anyway? He was just a silly apprentice like me, not someone I could confide in. What was up with him, anyway?

Iceflame had reported the fox fight to Stonestar, but I noticed she'd said Sunbright and Spiketail killed it, and that Spiketail had died a hero's death. I wasn't too sure about that, but cats could think what they wanted. I really didn't care, even if, truly, I was the one who had killed the fox. Was she trying not to make cats afraid of me?

"Three apprentices are getting new mentors today," Stonestar announced. "Unfortunately, the afternoon held the death of Minnowpelt. It's a very sad occasion. Littlecloud left to become a kittypet and Minnowpelt... anyway, Stormpaw, Duskypaw, Mistpaw, come here."

I obliged. I saw Mistpaw had tears in her eyes – how close had she been to Minnowpelt? Unless the Minnowpaw I knew had visited her as a kit, which I thought was very unlikely, they shouldn't know each other. So, Mistpaw had teared up for no reason. That was quite embarrassing, especially since she was in front of the Clan. I could see Sandwhisker already looking quite close to laughing.

"Stormpaw," Stonestar meowed quietly, "You'll be a warrior in about

a moon. I'm making you a warrior early because you're excellent. I'll follow up on your training, and be your mentor."

"So both my mentors are my relatives?" I grumbled under my breath before realizing the Clan leader was staring straight at me. His lip had curled slightly, but he didn't look angry as he touched noses politely with me.

"Mistpaw, your mentor will be Iceflame. Iceflame, as my deputy and my mate, I know you'll do a fantastic job. Duskypaw, your mentor will be Ashdust. Ashdust, you trained Birdcry well, although he is no longer with us."

"Stormpaw! Mistpaw! Duskypaw!"

I wondered why I couldn't take any joy in my Clanmates calling my name proudly. Maybe it was because I felt no loyalty to this Clan. How could I? My father was a rogue. Root. I wish I'd met him. Still, at least Wheatpelt was among the chanters. I'd half expected her to be sleeping. It mattered, to me, that she was there. Supporting me.

"Thanks, Wheatpelt," I murmured shyly as I hopped off the stumpy rock I'd been standing on.

"No problem!" Wheatpelt gave me the biggest smile. "I'd do it for anyone, but especially you."

"I mean, you should be resting," I said. "Your kits will be here any day now." I smiled at her, but I was feeling quite concerned. She wasn't really taking care.

Wheatpelt looked down at her rounded belly. "I know that. But now that I know about Kyla and Eagletail... I'm really not sure if I want them anymore." She stared now, at the ground, her eyes cloudy.

"Of course you want them!" My explosion probably startled Wheatpelt, but I couldn't hide my shock at all. She didn't want her little kits anymore? They weren't even in this world yet! "You must want them!" She could probably hear the horror in my voice.

"I mean, I do," Wheatpelt answered, though uncertainly. "Just not as much. Not anymore. You ... you understand, right? Spending a long

time wanting someone, and then not wanting them – or her, in your case – anymore?"

I knew who she was talking about. Peacewind. Yes, it was true. I'd spent my entire life longing for my mother and grieving my deceased father, and hating Lovegrass. All of a sudden, I'd refused my mother's offer to take me up as her daughter, and Lovegrass had died. I still hated her, but she wasn't here anymore to make me hate her more.

"I ... I do understand," I replied shakily. "But you have to want them, Wheatpelt."

"It's harder now." Wheatpelt looked away. "You know. I don't have a mate anymore. I'll be raising these kits alone, and it's not even like my mate died a warrior's death. He abandoned me." Her voice shook with fury that she wouldn't let out. Her face was a unreadable mask, but I could tell from her voice. She was furious with him.

"It's not your fault, I'm sure," I pleaded with her.

She shook her head. "You've been really supportive, Stormpaw, and I appreciate that. But ... the kits will never know their father..."

"They will," I said, hoping to cheer her up. "I could bring Eagletail to visit!"

"NO!"

Wheatpelt shocked me and probably half the Clan, who had been having their own conversations.

Wheatpelt's mask was gone, her face hot with fury. Her eyes blazed. "No!" she repeated, though less forcefully. "There's no way that's happening! Not ever! Not in your life! If Eagletail comes even a meter away, he's dead, Stormpaw. I hate him, and don't you dare speak of him again." With that, she whirled around, her swollen belly grazing the grass, and stalked off to the nursery unsteadily.

"Wow. You know, none of us could even go near her."

Emupaw.

"Yes?" I asked curtly.

"I mean, she's been angry at everyone since Eagletail's disappearance," Emupaw responded flatly. "You didn't know? Forever. And she warmed up to you. And now she's not. Don't act so surprised, that's all I'm saying."

"I... she was my only friend," I blurted, unsure why I was saying this to Emupaw.

"I'll tell you a thing," the golden-brown apprentice responded tartly, "that you're not the only cat who knows loss. She wasn't my mother, but I loved Dawnstream, you know. I never knew about Amberfire or Spiketail. I never knew anything about that. You know? Don't you say anything. You know nothing about loss together with betrayal. Sunbright and Spidertail weren't the best parents, let's say. Maybe you never knew it because you never saw me with them, but Minnowpelt and Littlecloud were my siblings, you know. Both gone. Ha! What did I even think they loved me for?" Emupaw snorted contemptuously, her tail flicking this way and that, barely hiding her obvious anger. It didn't burn with the heat or ferocity as Wheatpelt's, but it was strong all the same.

"Hey Emupaw! Where's Dawnstream?" The excited mew came from one of Starrynight's young kits. Her name was Honeykit, and she was a glossy golden she-cat. Emupaw had a soft spot for her.

Even so, Emupaw's mentor was a touchy subject with the golden-brown medicine cat apprentice. Emupaw's lip curled a little when facing the pretty golden kit.

"I'll be getting my full name tonight," Emupaw declared boldly to Honeykit, as if that was answer enough.

I wondered why she didn't directly answer Honeykit's question. Honeykit and her brother Hivekit would be bothering her for moons now.

Honeykit just bounced. "Dawnstream's taking you?" the golden she-

kit guessed.

Emupaw's eyes darkened and she stared at the ground. "I'm going alone."

"Oh!" piped up Hivekit. "But doesn't Dawnstream need to give me your full name?" She was so innocently curious, but apparently that wasn't what Emupaw would like to hear. Emupaw probably didn't even want to hear this entire conversation about Dawnstream.

"She already told me," Emupaw meowed, his voice shaking with fury, and then she left for the Moonstone.

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Chapter Six

"Stormpaw, step forward."

I stepped forward. It had been a moon since the death of Dawnstream, and Wheatpelt's kits still weren't born. No one knew what was wrong with her. The kits were seriously overdue. She had gone back to talking to me, as well as making a new friend in Emuwing. That surprised me, because Emuwing was also quite unfriendly.

"I, Stonestar, call upon the spirits of StarClan to look down on my apprentice. Stormpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

I stared him in the eye, surprising myself with how solemn I looked. I'd changed, in the two moons. I was myself at heart, but somehow, something was different now.

Maybe the fact that I'd strangely become friends with Emuwing. Or the fact that Duskypaw had been trailing me so much it was annoying. Somehow, I'd changed, and I didn't really want to be a warrior. What did it matter? I was half-Clan, half-rogue, and I would never be accepted anyway. Even if I swore this oath, would anyone ever see me? I tried to find my mother's face in the crowd, but she wasn't there.

"I do," I replied. I hoped my voice wasn't shaky, but it didn't seem so. Why would it be? I'd waited for this all my life, though I wasn't quite sure where my loyalties lay yet. I wasn't ready, and yet, when standing in front of the entire Clan, saying you weren't ready, that you needed more time to think - it was foolish, because it was normally a no-brainer whether to agree to become a warrior or not. No apprentice had ever said "I don't" at their warrior ceremony, and I didn't intend to be the first.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Stormpaw, from this moment onwards you will be known as

Stormdawn. StarClan honors your elegance and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SeasonClan!" Stonestar cheered happily.

Who honors elegance? I thought unhappily. And more, Stonestar couldn't have been further away from my qualities. I doubted very much that I was elegant, and he couldn't possibly know I struggled every day with whether I should stay in SeasonClan. My loyalty was probably the worst of my qualities, and here he was praising me for it.

"Stormdawn! Stormdawn!"

"Swankit, Duckkit, and Fallowkit, step forward."

The three of Lightmist's kits bounced forward excitedly. Lightmist and Hollowmist watched them with exasperated expressions - probably because all three of them had leaves all over their fur and Duckkit looked like he was waddling. Had they known that when they called him Duckkit? It was a very fitting name, by his attitude and his movements, because Duckkit was pretty dumb.

"Swanpaw, your mentor will be Stormdawn. Stormdawn, you received excellent training from Lovegrass and myself, and I am sure you will pass down all you know to your new apprentice."

I touched noses with Swanpaw. The white she-cat looked more graceful than I was already.

"Duckpaw, your mentor will be Peacewind. Peacewind, you received excellent training from Heathermist, and I know you will pass down all you know to your apprentice."

Peacewind touched noses with Duckpaw normally. I knew this was nothing extraordinary, but I didn't want to be training my apprentice alongside my mother! Our relationship was still so awkward. I'd only exchanged a passing greeting with her since I'd rejected her as my mother. Was Stonestar determined to make us spend time together? I wondered, as Peacewind gave me a motherly smile. Nope. NOT accepting that. NEVER accepting that.

"Lastly, Fallowpaw, your mentor will be Heathermist. Heathermist, you received excellent training from Birdcry, who has unfortunately passed away, and you trained both Peacewind and Littlecloud well. I trust you will pass down all you know to Fallowpaw."

"Swanpaw! Duckpaw! Fallowpaw! Swanpaw! Duckpaw! Fallowpaw!"

I chanted Swanpaw's and Fallowpaw's names loudly, like always, but hesitated on Duckpaw's. I shouldn't be doing this. Duckpaw had done nothing wrong! But he was apprenticed to my mother. I didn't get what Peacewind had done to deserve a perfectly good apprentice. Heathermist ... well, I didn't really know her, but if Stonestar wanted to give her a third apprentice, she must be a very good warrior.

Peacewind, on the other paw ...

I knew I shouldn't be doubting her. I should be doubting myself. But Peacewind just ... I didn't know her, did I? I hardly knew her. My own mother. And I hardly knew her.

And I didn't want to know her.

"Go to bed, Swanpaw," I licked my new apprentice's ear. "I want you ready by dawn tomorrow. I might be a bit tired from my vigil, so put up with my weariness, alright?"

"Yes!" Swanpaw nodded extremely happily. She happily ran off to the nursery before making a sharp turn to the apprentices' den, looking quite sheepish at her obvious mistake. Still, Duckpaw literally entered the nursery and got shooed out by Appledawn.

She licked my ear in return and left. I sighed. It was going to be a long night.

"Do you want me to be with you? For a little while, I mean."

I whirled around. Oh, shoot. Duskypaw. "What?" I snapped, my voice irritated for no reason at all.

"I was being nice." He made an attempt at sounding hurt. Didn't

work.

"Hey. You know it's traditional for warrior to sit their vigil alone if they don't have littermates or cats the same age as them?"

Phew! Saved by Cloudysky. He was a relatively young warrior, only a few moons older than Emuwing. He was from a five-kit litter which only he and Appledawn had survived.

"It is?" Duskypaw looked mortified.

"Hey." Cloudysky stared. "If you think you're doing it alone, you can be a mouse-brain and look at your three siblings right behind you."

Duskypaw looked around. Indeed, Mistpaw, Sunnypaw and Morningpaw were all staring at him. They looked away when he stared straight at them.

"Well, see you tomorrow!" Duskypaw grinned at me. "You can train Swanpaw with us!"

"Most definitely not," I responded. "She's a moon younger than you!"

Duskypaw didn't really show signs of sadness at me saying Swanpaw couldn't come, and I wasn't surprised. I was pretty sure the real cat he wanted to spend time with was me, and me alone.

Too bad for him, because I didn't like him.

I was then left alone with Cloudysky.

"Good luck," the gray-and-white warrior said briefly before leaving.

~

It was a cool night. I could see the orange streaks of dawn showing in the sky. I stretched, surprised that I wasn't tired at all.

And then I saw that my body was in sleeping position. I'd just woken up from a princess's slumber, while I was supposed to be standing vigil and keeping watch over the camp. This was my big moment, the day I'd become a warrior - wait, my second day - and

on my first big event, I'd failed it by sleeping.

No. Way.

I'd FALLEN ASLEEP??? On WATCH??? How- I- was I the first cat in history to do that?!

I hopped to my paws.

No one was there. It wasn't really dawn yet, so the dawn patrol wasn't up.

That didn't change the fact that I'd FALLEN ASLEEP. On my WARRIOR'S VIGIL.

Great StarClan!!!!

No one saw, I repeated to myself. No one saw.

And, luckily, no one did.

A few minutes later, Iceflame emerged from the warriors' den.

"Rough night?" she guessed.

I nodded, playing along and faking a yawn. "Y-yeah. Remind me not to do that again."

"You probably won't need to," she responded. "I normally set night owls on night watch."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," I nodded. "To warn you, I'm a morning lark."

That got a laugh out of Iceflame. "Yeah, you are," she meowed, and left.

I went into camp and decided to give Swanpaw a few more moments of rest. It wasn't exactly dawn yet, only Iceflame always woke a few moments before. I accidentally bumped into Cloudysky.

"Oh! Oops. Sorry," I mumbled, moving away from him sheepishly. Why did I keep seeing him since last night?

"Stormdawn. Wait."

I looked back. This seemed just like one of the Duskypaw moments -

"I saw that."

"Saw ... saw what?" I stammered. "I'm sorry for bumping into you. I said that."

He flicked his tail in amusement. "Not that. I know you slept."

My eyes widened. "No, I didn't."

He laughed. "I can tell from your expression. I won't tell anyone. If it helps, Appledawn was the only thing keeping me awake on my day." He grinned cheekily at me, but it hardly made me feel better.

"Heh," I muttered. "Promise me."

"I promise not to tell anyone," Cloudysky agreed.

I shot him an embarrassed look, said sorry for his trouble, and ran off to train Swanpaw.

She was already awake when I got there. Duckpaw was still asleep but Heathermist had apparently wanted to get an early day with Fallowpaw.

As I brought Swanpaw to the clearing to get ready for the tour of the territory, I bumped into Heathermist.

"Oh, hi," she meowed. "Do you want to let Fallowpaw and Swanpaw go out together?"

"That would be nice," I nodded.

"Right then." She looked over her shoulder. "This rogue turned up last night. How come you didn't see him? We found him in camp in the morning."

"Oh," I said, my heart palpitating wildly. What if he had just walked in right past me? Would he tell the Clan? "Do you think he came in

through the dirtplace or something?"

"Probably," Heathermist agreed reasonably. "If not you'd have seen him!" she added. I heaved an inward sigh of relief. "Hey, where's Duckpaw and Peacewind?" Heathermist asked suddenly.

"Duckpaw's sleeping," Swanpaw said. "Apparently he doesn't know he has to wake up at dawn."

I gave her a gentle chuckle and a small smile.

"You're not looking for my sister, are you? She's still sleeping." The response came from Joyspirit, who was passing by. "Oh, and you can stay for the rogue's ceremony. Stonestar's letting him join."

"What for?" I scowled. I hated myself for probably letting him through already. I really hoped he had come in by the dirtplace, because if not I'd be in big trouble. It was my fault the rogue was there, and would he even be let into the Clan? SeasonClan still had many warriors, despite the huge number that had left to become kittypets.

"I guess he thinks we need new apprentices?" Joyspirit shrugged. "I don't know. We have seven already, and two more kits, as well as Wheatpelt's overdue-by-one-moon litter thing. They're going to be born soon?"

"Everyone's said that for the last moon," Heathermist objected.

"Ah well." Joyspirit sighed darkly. "Let's see what Strap's name becomes."

"What's a strap?" Swanpaw asked curiously. I shook my head, having no answer for the young apprentice. Joyspirit shrugged too. We'd probably need to be kittypets to understand what a strap was, it sounded like some Twoleg thing.

"Let all cats gather below the High rock for a Clan meeting!"

All cats gathered below, myself included. Swanpaw scooted away and sat beside Fallowpaw, and Duckpaw sleepily came out of the apprentices' den. Peacewind was being towed along by

Patienceheart, whom she was angrily snapping at. Something about beauty sleep - who even got that nowadays, when all their Clanmates were leaving?

None had left in the past moon, thank StarClan. The remainder were loyal.

"Strap, step forward."

A wiry striped brown nervous-looking rogue obliged.

"Strap, from this moment onwards, you will be known as Stripepaw. Your mentor will be Cloudysky, and I trust he will pass down all he knows to you."

"Stripepaw! Stripepaw!"

The cats who called Stripepaw's name were few, and I myself found my mouth opening and closing with no sound coming out. Was I that unenthusiastic about Stripepaw becoming an apprentice? I should probably congratulate Cloudysky, seeing as he was willingly keeping a secret for me, I should be nice to him too.

"I kinda feel like they should've given you Strap - I mean, Stripepaw."

Duskypaw AGAIN? He was going to be a warrior in a moon, and then he'd have even more time on his paws to bother me. Come on! I cared nothing for him, nothing at all. I didn't love Duskypaw. He might love me, but I didn't love him back. I saw Darkkit, Oakkit, Lilykit, Honeykit and Hivekit all yowling protest about Stripepaw. Maybe because Ashenface's kits - Darkkit, Oakkit and Lilykit - had expected to become apprentices first.

"Congrats," I said, forcing myself to be cheerful as I faced Cloudysky. It was unexpectedly difficult to grin at a tom.

"Could I join you for that tour?" he asked cheerily.

He knew? How? Well, I guessed all new apprentices got the tour. "He already knows our territory pretty well, doesn't he?" I responded dourly, shooting an unreadable glance at Stripepaw.

"After all, he seems to have found our camp."

Cloudysky shrugged. "He was accepted, and that's all we need to know, right?" He looked curiously at me, as if wondering why I was not keen on accepting Stripepaw into our midst.

I frowned at him. "That's all? Are you crazy?"

He shot me the cheekiest of grins. "Maybe."

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Chapter Seven

I took Swanpaw, Fallowpaw and Stripepaw out, along with Duckpaw. Trailing behind were Heathermist, Cloudysky and Peacewind, who didn't seem happy that me, the inexperienced brand-new warrior, was leading us. Cloudysky seemed perfectly fine, and Heathermist looked encouraging, but it was my own mother who'd not liked it.

She'd objected when Cloudysky suggested it. Heathermist had yelled at her.

And that was the only reason why Peacewind was trailing quietly behind us, only looking slightly disgruntled. Because her former mentor had yelled at her in front of her brand-new apprentice, and she was embarrassed. What a disgrace!

"Great job," Peacewind praised as Duckpaw stepped on a twig. There was sarcasm in her mew.

"Hey, I'm not hunting," Duckpaw responded with a jovial grin.

"Alas," Heathermist sighed gravely. "I suppose we have nothing left to do except show you the Twolegplace." Why did she look so grave when she said that? I opened my mouth to ask, but Cloudysky answered my question.

"No, Heathermist," Cloudysky objected. "You know what happened when you showed Littlecloud Twolegplace!" His eyes widened in fear. I paused.

"That ... we could see him," I said, thinking more of Eagletail when I said that. "He doesn't know Minnowpelt is dead, does he?"

Cloudysky relented. "Fine."

He followed Heathermist to Twolegplace slightly unwillingly. I did too, slowly trudging behind the group, my thoughts anywhere but

on Littlecloud.

~

We did meet Littlecloud and he was devastated by Minnowpelt's death.

"My sister? Dead?" Littlecloud choked. "From standing a warriors' vigil?" He was petrified.

"That's right," Peacewind agreed unsympathetically. She glanced at us as if to say, can we go now? I glared at her.

"That day?" Littlecloud repeated. He looked shocked. Perhaps because he had been woefully absent from her vigil, and maybe his warmth would've helped her survive. He was stiff, and he didn't move.

We all nodded. I thought, what was the problem? But Littlecloud's eyes were darkening with fury.

"You should have told me right then, Stormpaw!" he spat. He was angry at me, was he now?

"Stormdawn, you stupid furball," I meowed casually. "You know, if you had stuck around instead of running off, perhaps you would have been notified when she died." My gaze hardened. "But you were selfish and decided to become a kittypet. Not the best choice, but hey, I'm not you. I don't enjoy food pellets and Twoleg pelts."

Littlecloud took a step back at the insult. "Look. Stormdawn. I did ... I loved her. A lot. But I love my new mate more. Okay? Just ... StarClan can judge me as they please, but a lot of our Clanmates are among these Twolegs, you know? Eagletail. Some others that weren't even there when I was born! There's this funny gray she-cat called Mousewing. She's apparently Hollowmist's mother, did you know? She left with her mate Stoneshadow."

I shrugged. "I don't need to know this, Littlecloud. Minnowpelt is dead." I turned to leave, absently watching Swanpaw.

"Can I pay my respects?"

I shrugged. It wasn't my choice. But Heathermist was already shaking her head swiftly but decisively and fixing her former apprentice with a hard stare.

"Littlecloud, you made a choice," the older warrior meowed tartly. "You cannot go back on it now."

For a moment, he looked like he regretted it as he faced his former mentor. Then he relented.

"Maybe so," he responded. "But I believe Hazelshade is worth everything."

Oh right. Hazelshade. Iceflame's maybe-daughter. I wasn't jealous at all. I didn't even think he'd ever loved me. Not that it mattered, right? I didn't want a mate. Didn't ever.

I scanned his house, my odd powerful sight scanning through everything. Inside stood a plump white she-cat who was gorging herself on that awful kittypet pellets that they called food. So, that was Littlecloud's mate? I couldn't tell if she was expecting kits or whether she was just fat.

"Stormdawn! Quit creeping us out! Why are you staring straight at Littlecloud like that?"

I hadn't realized I was looking through Littlecloud, because my super-cool vision could apparently see through anything. Maybe he had moved in the way while I was looking.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Let's go back."

Heathermist nodded agreement, although it had been her idea to come in the first place. We were all awkwardly shuffling away when Littlecloud called after us.

"Wait! Where... Where is she buried? May I... I want to..."

"You made a choice," I said flatly.

His eyes were so filled with sorrow that I almost killed myself for being so mean to him. But then he nodded, his eyes darkening.

"I understand," he meowed coldly. "Warriors are heartless. That's one of the reasons I left." I smiled grimly back.

"We look after each other," I mewed. "I had only hoped you would as well."

For a moment, he was unable to speak, but then he nodded and dashed inside his Twoleg den.

As we walked back, Swanpaw chatted animatedly with Fallowpaw and Duckpaw and Peacewind and Heathermist talked about strategies for training apprentices. Cloudysky approached me.

"Did you love him?" he asked gently and quietly.

"Love who?" I asked, absent-mindedly. Why were we always on this topic these days? It wasn't so long ago that Emuwing had asked me if I loved Duskypaw. As if! But Emuwing had actually seemed really disappointed.

"Littlecloud," he responded.

"What? No!" I replied instantly. Love LITTLECLOUD? Great StarClan, no! Why would I love Littlecloud of all people? Besides, he had a mate. Hazelshade, or whatever her name was.

"Well, just saying," Cloudysky meowed quietly. "I saw how you looked at him. Then your lip curled in disgust, like about what he'd done, abandoned you. Is that how you feel?" He almost looked concerned for me. Now, if anything was wrong, it was the concern he showed for me. He must like me too, but I didn't want him to.

"You a young warrior or an ancient elder?" I responded lightly. "I don't love him." My lips had probably curled upon seeing the food pellets. Or at least, what was supposed to be food. Not Littlecloud. I'd never, ever loved Littlecloud. Because he and I and Minnowpelt ... we'd never been close. I hadn't been with Emuwing until a moon ago. I avoided his eyes.

"You love him," Cloudysky repeated. He almost looked ... sad.

"Why do you care?" I was finally feeling a spark of annoyance at

him, like the annoyance I always felt at Duskypaw when he trailed me around. Don't tell me it was another tom mooning over me. I'd had enough of those insolent furballs!

"Uh --- um --- because I've seen the way Duskypaw looks at you," Cloudysky said finally. "He's my brother too, remember? Shadowheart and Firespring are my parents too."

"Duskypaw," I repeated. That was it? Caring about Duskypaw? Wow. Whoa. He thought I loved LITTLECLOUD? That was crazy enough, then doing all this for DUSKYPAW? I'd never even seen them together. They were the kind of siblings that no one knew they were related. No way. He probably had some hidden intentions!

Cloudysky nodded, shying away from my gaze. He called out to Stripepaw and the two of them hurried along. He didn't speak to me for the rest of the return journey. I didn't mind and kept my distance from him, engaging in conversation with Heathermist.

We made it back okay, and Swanpaw and the others were exhausted. We hadn't had lunch and all of us were starving, so we grabbed some prey and gobbled it up. It was quite late already, coming to sundown, so we were eating for lunch and dinner.

"I've never starved before," Swanpaw meowed matrer-of-factly. "I thought, you know, we wouldn't skip meals during spring."

"You were alive during last winter" I retorted. She had been, newborn though.

"Chill girl, she was still suckling," Cloudysky replied. "Shadowheart might've gone hungry, but she didn't." The first time he'd talked to me in what, half an hour? Still, that didn't mean my patience with him had built up.

"Too true," I grumbled. "And what do you mean, chill girl?" He shot me a sheepish grin before moving back over to Stripepaw. Silly tom. All toms were silly but he was particularly dumb.

I had gone hungry because, one, I'd been weaned by then and an

apprentice, and two, it wasn't like Peacewind would've suckled me anyway.

I nudged Swanpaw to the apprentices' den where the poor cat collapsed into a blissful sleep. I laughed quietly to myself.

"Oh – hey, Stormdawn! I didn't see you there!" I could recognize his energetic voice from miles away. I groaned softly then turned around, forcing a smile onto my face.

"Hi, Duskypaw," I responded, trying my best not to sound bored of him. I didn't know why I was trying; it would be best if he left me out of annoyance and angry.

Then again, Duskypaw was the easygoing type and that might not stop him.

"We haven't talked in a while." The dusk-colored apprentice plopped himself down beside me. His eyes sparkled when I even looked at him.

"One day," I rolled my eyes. "It's not like we're mates or anything!"

Duskypaw's eyes widened at my snappy comment. "I ... I know we're not," he finally conceded, and I knew exactly what he was going to say. "But I thought ... when I'm older ... and ready ... would you become my mate?" His eyes were practically shining and I knew it would be awful to turn him down, but I wasn't going to pretend I loved him.

"Maybe someday. When my feelings return for you, and I have time." I turned away. I'd given an obvious clue I didn't love him, by saying 'when my feelings return for you'.

"So ... you don't love me?" His response was quiet, wanting me to say I did.

I couldn't. I didn't love him.

"Not now. Probably never," was my only reply. "You're a good cat, Duskypaw, but I've learnt my lesson about love. If Peacewind taught me anything by her treatment of me, it was that love is the sharpest

claw and it's not worthwhile."

Peacewind hadn't ever told me that. It was actually Shadowheart who had. She truly loved Firespring. But with the deaths of three of her kits already, she said it wasn't worthwhile. The pain was there, and it never went away.

It might make me sound awful, but I didn't want to love anyone in my life.

I didn't love Iceflame. Didn't love Stonestar. Didn't love anyone in this flea-bitten Clan. Strangely, not even Wheatpelt or Emuwing.

"Wheatpelt's kits are coming!"

"Oh, finally," was all me, and pretty much everyone in the Clan, could mutter.

I waltzed off. I didn't know if Wheatpelt wanted me there, but I wasn't her mate. I couldn't love because love blinded, and love caused pain and sorrow worse than anything else.

Peacewind's betrayal had pretty much killed any part of me that ever wanted or felt loved.

It was hours before she had finished kitting, and I was the first to get there.

I went in to visit Wheatpelt's kits, and acted like I'd been waiting outside. Wheatpelt sighed impatiently.

"Why didn't you come in?" she asked, looking slightly annoyed with me.

"They're not mine," I replied tartly, but it came out gentle.

"I guess not." Wheatpelt let out a long sigh. "That was painful." She looked down bleakly at her kits.

"We're always told," I agreed bleakly. Was she going to say anything to me? At all, that wasn't about her kitting or the kits?

"Do you want to name them?" Wheatpelt asked tentatively, staring affectionately down at the kits she had declared unwanted a moon ago. Her gaze, so filled with love, showed she obviously felt otherwise.

I shook my head. "They're yours." I turned to leave, like any ordinary visitor would.

She only laughed gently. "You're going to help me with them, right? You promised. So, you should name one at least." Her three kits rolled around at her belly, suckling peacefully.

"Fine, then," I mumbled. "Um. For that black one, maybe Charredkit?"

"Like burnt?" Her eyes hardened. "Is that something good to name a kit?" What? No? Hey, she'd asked me, and I gave awful names.

"I don't know!" I moved back. "I'm bad with kit names, okay! If not Charredkit, maybe Nightkit." Nightkit was boring, but a same name, at least. It wasn't awful, just plain.

"Okay."

What?! She agreed?! But Nightkit was so boring and plain! I didn't say so, though.

"How about this one? Her fur is so sleek!" Wheatpelt gushed.

"All young kits' furs are sleek," Emuwing replied flatly from where she stood at the edge of the nursery. Wheatpelt glared daggers at the medicine cat who happened to be the one who had prevented her from dying of blood loss. Emuwing rolled her eyes at the new mother and looked back at the herbs the had remaining from the kitting.

"Sleekkit? But maybe her fur will turn rough," I said to myself, slowly feeling the sleek kit. Yep, it was only sleek with kit fur.

"She's gray," Wheatpelt added unhelpfully. "Alas! I'd have named this cutie Stormkit. But you're already Stormdawn."

"Eh." I shrugged. "I'd be fine with that, you know."

Wheatpelt shook her head. "She has to be unique! How about Lovekit?"

"For a kit?" I was really recoiling because of the thought of Lovegrass.

Wheatpelt sighed. "Maybe not. Gray. Think of names!" She sounded almost exasperated with me, maybe because I'd rejected her name when she was the mother. Still, I couldn't grasp why she'd possibly want to name her kit Lovekit. So cringy!

"Graykit. Duskkit. Skykit. Twilightkit."

"I think, Skykit," Wheatpelt agreed. "And that last one? The white one?"

"There are obvious names. Cloudkit – but there's already Cloudysky. Snowkit – that's a really common name. Skykit – but you're naming that tom that, right. Or ... Edelweisskit. Or maybe Fluffykit. She is fluffy."

"Fluffykit," Wheatpelt confirmed.

"So ... Nightkit, Skykit, and Fluffykit," I confirmed.

"Two she-cats and a tom," Wheatpelt nodded. "Stormdawn ... you are going to be involved, right?" She narrowed her eyes at me, her gaze hard and demanding.

"What do you mean?" My gaze hardened too. I did love Wheatpelt like a mother, but literally taking care of her kits was going too far. "I have an apprentice." I'm going to be very busy, I added to myself silently. I had no idea why I didn't say that out loud.

"You promised!" Wheatpelt looked hysterical. She looked tired, too, but more hysterical.

"I'll leave you alone now," I murmured, backing out of the den. Wheatpelt watched me with anguished eyes and then her head flopped to the ground and she fell asleep. I snorted. Kept awake by

anger? I scanned the camp. Swanpaw was sleeping peacefully in the apprentices' den. Wait ... I could hear Stonestar and Iceflame arguing in there, with Emuwing. Wait, no, Stonestar was arguing with Iceflame and Emuwing. I strained my ears, willing myself to listen. I was pretty far away, that was probably why.

I went a little closer and managed to hear their argument.

"We are not attacking our Clanmates!" Emuwing was fuming. What? Attacking Clanmates? What had gotten into Stonestar?

"We need those cats back for SeasonClan!" spat Stonestar. "Kittypets they became, no less! We'll get back Eagletail and Littlecloud for starters, and then all those other cats!"

"Some of them became loners!" Iceflame argued angrily and exasperatedly.

"Then we'll find them!" Stonestar flashed back, as angry as her and maybe more exasperated.

"We can't do that! They made a choice!" Emuwing protested.

"A choice they will REGRET!" Stonestar yelled.

I could basically hear Iceflame flinch. She wasn't used to yelling back at her mate, plus her leader, and her eyes were pained, longing for Stonestar to probably be the cat who'd gently fathered Lovegrass, Joyspirit, Peacewind and Patienceheart.

"Stonestar," Iceflame was meowing hoarsely. "Please no. Our Clanmates can choose their destinies, can't they? If they want to be kittypets, so be it!"

"Maybe so," Stonestar meowed, "but they swore to protect SeasonClan. Maybe nothing has happened since Eagletail and Littlecloud left, but Birdcry died to a fox a few batches ago! They let a Clanmate die!"

"Stonestar!" Iceflame gasped dramatically.

"Don't 'Stonestar!' me!" Stonestar yelled. "I made my"

"Stonestar," Emuwing meowed quietly. "I think someone's eavesdropping."

What? How did she know? I was right outside the warriors' den, not the leaders'! But I saw a flash of orangey-red fur and a glint of emerald eyes.

Amberfire.

What was going on? Why was she eavesdropping? I knew she'd gotten over Dawnstream and Spiketail, or at least I thought she had. And eavesdropping?

"Amberfire!" I said. "Do you think we should have a hunting patrol about now? Not every cat has had their evening meal."

Amberfire jumped from her position outside the leaders' den. "Wh-what? Oh – uh – we ... need to ask Iceflame, right?"

"Yeah, where is she?" I feigned confusion.

"Uh ... inside the den, I think," Amberfire stuttered.

"Right." I didn't say anything about her eavesdropping; after all, technically, so was I.

The two of us walked into the den together. Emuwing's eyes narrowed suspiciously at Amberfire, and she gave me a questioning look. I gave her a look that we'd standardized: I'll tell you later.

The questioning expression vanished, replaced by a stony mask as she stared at Amberfire through slitted eyes.

"We were wondering if we could do a hunting patrol," I finally said, a little too stiffly. Why was I covering for Amberfire's curiosity again?

"Now?" Stonestar sounded surprised, but not angry.

Emuwing just looked more suspicious, and her eyes darted over to mine. What's going on? She signed with her paws in the usual flurry of steps.

"What was that, Emuwing?" Iceflame questioned quietly.

The golden-brown medicine cat shook her head, but her eyes were on me. "Nothing," she said casually. Iceflame's eyes darkened suspiciously.

"Not everyone has eaten," I told Stonestar, perhaps a little too flatly. As if in harmony with my words, Emuwing's belly gave a loud rumble.

She grinned apologetically.

"Fine then," Iceflame meowed. "I'll go with you. Emuwing, if you wanted to gather that tansy since everyone's coughing nowadays, you can take Amberfire. Stormdawn, go find Sunbright, Spidertail, and Hollowmist."

"Right," I agreed. How come Sunbright and Spidertail were always on the same patrol? I mean, I knew they were mates, but wasn't this overkill? Still, I wasn't going to argue with the Clan deputy, so I set off to find them.

I ended up interrupting two kisses. Sunbright and Spidertail's, and Hollowmist and Lightmist's. By the end of that, I was feeling extremely embarrassed as I led them away, leaving Lightmist behind. Hollowmist's mate looked surprised, hurt even, as her mate trailed behind me to Iceflame.

"Congrats in doing that," Hollowmist grumbled. "She was going to tell me something!"

"Oh, sorry," I said, though I knew I wasn't sounding even the slightest bit apologetic. "Iceflame chose you for the hunting patrol."

Hollowmist groaned. "I already hunted today."

"You can hunt again," Sunbright scolded her littermate sternly. "Not everyone is full."

"Everyone is," Hollowmist yawned.

"I haven't eaten. Neither has Emuwing," I protested. "I don't think

Starrynight has either, and she has to look after Honeykit and Hivekit."

Finally Hollowmist nodded agreement, at the mention of another queen. He was still a little grudging, though.

Not too long later, we'd caught three squirrels, four mice, two rabbits and a plump vole. I added my final thrush to that pile and we carried it back to camp.

"Oh, thanks," Starrynight meowed quietly. "I didn't see anything in the pile!" She took the plump vole, looking incredibly relieved.

"Mom was gonna starve us," Hivekit whined. Honeykit whacked him with her tail.

"No she wasn't!" The golden she-kit corrected her brother. "She was gonna thwack us!"

The two kits erupted into giggles. I stared back. I'd never ... I'd never played with anyone my age. Littlecloud, Minnowpelt and Emuwing had been older, and I hadn't even had a mother to play with. And there they were. The two of them. A week old, and wrestling happily.

I sighed, almost yearning for my childhood back.

"Hey. You ok?"

I looked at who'd said that. Cloudysky.

"I'm fine," I muttered, looking towards the fresh-kill pile. "I guess I should get some prey."

"Good hunting tonight," Cloudysky commented.

"So, I suppose you haven't eaten either," I meowed, my eyebrows raised.

Cloudysky shrugged. "I had a tiny shrew. You never know how tiring Stripepaw is. He just ran around the whole territory."

"So did we," I pointed out, thinking of myself and Swanpaw.

"Did she run?" he asked pointedly.

I frowned. "Well ... not really."

"There," he said simply.

He took my thrush and walked off, before calling back. "Do you want to share prey?" He was smiling, as was his signature.

"Nah," I said. "I'm pretty hungry myself. Not sharing food with a bottomless pit." I wasn't sure if he was, but I didn't like sharing prey. Not with anyone. Not with him.

He nodded simply. Well, Cloudysky did seem like the easygoing type. I moved over to the pile and grabbed that plump vole, hoping no one was looking – I mean, I probably shouldn't be taking so much food. Finally, I grabbed another mouse and went to share with Emuwing. I could share prey with her, at least. I knew I could trust her.

"Hey," she greeted me with a smile. "I already had a mouse, but I am a bit hungry still." She grinned.

"Have some, there's more than enough," I said, taking a big bite of the vole.

Emuwing smiled. "I prefer mouse." She grabbed that mouse I'd brought and devoured it in a series of quick bites.

I smiled at my friend. It was good that I did know people, at least.

"How're you and Duskypaw getting along?" Emuwing asked.

I shrugged.

"He'll be a warrior in a moon," Emuwing pressed. "Unless they're keeping him as an apprentice for six. Nowadays, we train at three or four."

"Yeah, only slow apprentices get kept for six moons," I agreed. "But

no. I have absolutely no relationship with Duskypaw, whatever feelings he might have for me."

"Well," Emuwing pressed, "If you're not going to be with him, you can look at the other tom who's padding after you."

"What?" I said. Padding after me? Whoa, who? Who had I hung out with? Well, surely it wasn't Duskypaw's brother Morningpaw. I mean, I wasn't really interested in Shadowheart's kits.

The moment I thought Shadowheart's name, it clicked.

Cloudysky.

"Nope, don't have feelings for him either," I sighed.

Emuwing looked over at me sadly. "I'm sure it's not that way," she protested, her green eyes sparkling. "I mean, every cat loves someone." There was a deep sorrow in her voice as she said that. Like she loved someone, too. Emuwing's love was forbidden, so loving someone for her would be sorrowful indeed.

"You do, too," I stated matter-of-factly. It was too obvious, the way her eyes had given off sadness.

"Will you not tell anyone?" Emuwing whispered softly.

"Of course not," I assured her. "But you're not mating with him." You can't, I added silently to myself.

"I – I know," she sighed. "I don't think he has feelings for me either. But, um ... I like Woodfur."

"Who now?" I asked, then I remembered the brown tom. "Oh, him. What, seriously? He's ancient."

Emuwing suppressed a giggle with great difficulty, then let it out.

We had a series of jokes about the ancient brown tom, and by that time, Emuwing had stopped acting lovey when I mentioned his name. I pointed out all his mistakes as I watched him lumber around camp, and slowly, slowly her expression cleared.

The feelings weren't gone, but after an entire evening spent teasing him, they had at least faded a little.

THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN EDITED ON MONDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Eight

I woke up at dawn the next day. It was bright and sunny, pale gold and pink streaks glowing in the sky.

It was so breathtakingly beautiful.

"I like looking at it too," someone meowed from beside me.

Duskypaw. AGAIN?!

Oh, StarClan save me. Two toms padding after me, and two toms I wasn't interested in. Why did they like me?

"Don't you have training to get to?" I questioned him, actually trying to get rid of him.

"Not yet," he grimaced. "And, um," He added pointedly, "We didn't talk yesterday."

"We can't talk every day," I snapped back. "We're just Clanmates!"

Duskypaw looked back, amber eyes glowing with emotion. "I did tell you how I felt about you, Stormdawn."

I transfixed him with my unwavering violet stare. "I know how you feel." I sighed deeply. I wished I could tell him I loved him back. Duskypaw was a nice cat. He didn't deserve rejection. "There are other nice cats out there," I meowed forlornly, turning my back on the orange streaks across the sky.

"I want you," he protested.

"You're only an apprentice," I sighed.

"You make it sound like you're much, much older," he responded, eyes alight with mischief.

I let out a dry chuckle. "I'm not ancient, but I feel like I am." Wait.

My ears snapped at the sound. Crunching of leaves somewhere in the territory. Now ... oh. Great Redwood. But the dawn patrol was headed to the border with Twolegplace ... I scanned the forest, through the trees, seeking everything that glowed orange underneath my heat vision. I didn't understand my powers, but I could use them.

I saw a group of cats, led by a snow-white she-cat with burning bright flame-colored amber eyes. Her eyes were darkened.

"Hey – Stormdawn! What are you looking at? What's so alarming?"

"Go back to camp," I instructed Duskypaw, "and wake everyone up. We're dealing with a big group of rogues, here."

Duskypaw's ears perked immediately. "What? Rogues! Where?"

"Go!" I hissed.

Maybe he obeyed me because he loved me. Maybe he was afraid. But either way, his dusk-colored form vanished into the trees. I knew the Great Redwood wouldn't be in the path back to camp.

Thank StarClan it wasn't.

I was going to confront the rogues myself, after all.

I trekked through the forest, scanning. The rogues were moving at an alarming speed, coming right in my direction. Finally, I stopped. They were headed towards me anyway – why would I walk? Let them do the walking to get to me.

I saw them pause, hiding in the bushes as they were. They could see me. I was right in the open, and they were wary.

"I can smell you," I called, "and I can see you. Don't worry. I'm not looking for a fight."

Finally, the white she-cat with her smoldering amber eyes came out of the bushes. An orange-and-white tabby tom, as well as a brownish-gray she-cat, followed closely behind her, unsheathed claws ripping open the undergrowth.

"You can stop that, unless you want snagged claws," I informed the snow-white she-cat's two bodyguards.

The brownish-gray she-cat let out a hiss of annoyance but retracted her claws.

The snow-white cat turned to me. "Are you one of those Clan cats?" she asked warily.

"Yes. I am." I meowed. "Why don't I escort you to the border, and we can talk. I can see you might have crossed it by accident?"

"By accident!" The orange-and-white tom sneered.

"Quiet!" The snow-white she-cat rounded on him. "Maybe we didn't cross it by accident, but this is her territory!"

I frowned. Confusion clouded my mind. She was ... scolding him? Maybe they weren't enemies.

"My name is Stormdawn," I meowed, in the beginnings of a friendly gesture. "What's yours?"

"My name is I-am-going-to-kill-you-now," The orange-and-white tom hissed.

I raised my eyebrows. "That's a first."

"Stop it, Sunstreak!" The snow-white she-cat snapped.

Sunstreak? That sounded like a warrior name! "Are you a Clan?" I asked finally. "Sunstreak ... forgive me, but that sounds like a warrior name." I was actually curious.

"You're right about that!" Sunstreak snarled. "I'm a freakin' warrior, and a better one than you!"

I raised my eyebrows again – had they seriously gone down? "Well," I said, "I know warriors respect borders, and if they did cross them, they crossed for a reason," I meowed patiently. "If you don't mind," I turned to the snow-white she-cat, "Could you explain what's going on?"

"Are you deputy?" she asked, but not in an intimidating way.

"No, I'm not," I shook my head. "Actually, I'm a relatively new warrior. Are you leader?"

She nodded. "My name is Lightstar," she meowed quietly.

"Lightstar," I nodded.

"Of CloudClan," she meowed quietly.

"I'm of SeasonClan," I said. "We used to be divided into four, but now our camp is in the forest, although some of our cats live by the stream and in the pines."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed.

" ... yes?" I asked. "Are you looking for someone?"

"SummerClan," she responded.

Last time, SeasonClan had been divided into four Clans - SummerClan, AutumnClan, WinterClan and SpringClan. There were great founders of each Clan - Summerstar, Autumnstar, Winterstar and Springstar. Their sister was Peaceheart, who kept the peace, and they were all important figures, as well as some of SummerClan's other leaders like Froststar. However, all four Clans had joined together a long time ago, only dividing once more so some cats could live by the river.

"Oh. Um, we are SummerClan. All of the seasons joined together. Besides, SummerClan was gone ages ago. Why? You descended from somebody?"

"Yes," Lightstar meowed. "This whole Clan – all of us – we are descendants of Feathermist. Or rather, Peaceheart." Feathermist was Peaceheart's daughter.

"The legendary Peaceheart?" I choked.

Lightstar nodded. "CloudClan lived by the river, but our territory was wrecked."

"You have nine lives?" I found myself asking.

"Erm..." Sunstreak meowed. "Naw! Her name is Lightcry. She's our acting leader!"

Lightstar – or, apparently, Lightcry – rounded on him. "Hey! You agreed to this!" She sounded co childish.

I suddenly saw the youth in Lightcry. She wasn't an old, ancient leader. She was perhaps a few moons older than me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll take you back."

"Who's your leader?" Lightcry asked.

"Stonestar. Our deputy is Iceflame. They're my grandparents," I informed her brightly.

Lightcry nodded, almost curiously, and followed me back to camp.

Stonestar had rounded up a patrol. Duskypaw was at the front and looked extremely confused when I brought a group of ten cats – all of CloudClan – into camp. Stonestar tried fixing an unwavering stare on Lightcry, but he wasn't a very intimidating cat. Lightcry's smoldering amber eyes burned into Stonestar's, and I could see the power, the authority there.

"My name is Lightcry," she meowed strongly. "We are descendants of Peaceheart."

"PEACEHEART?" Stonestar bellowed extremely loudly.

He probably expected Lightcry to jump back. I would've jumped back. But Lightcry continued with her unwavering amber stare, and I could see Stonestar looking intimidated, all because of her smoking, dangerous eyes.

"He's Sunstreak. She's Earthmist." The brownish-gray she-cat stepped forward, her eyes glowing. "They're Plumwhisker, Forestclaw, Iceleaf, Marshstep, Cocoaleaf, Blackfur and Mudwish."

All her warriors stepped forward in harmony as their names were

called. I saw Iceleaf's movements were slowed, and she looked like the was heavily expecting.

"Well, they should go," Ashdust meowed.

Silkpelt wrapped her tail around him. "Hush! If it's true they're Peaceheart's descendants, they're our kin!"

"Uh..." Ashdust now looked confused. "What?"

"At the least," I said, "we should look after them for a little while. They came all the way here." All cats' eyes were on me now. "Iceleaf," I meowed gently. "The nursery is this way."

The eyes went back to Stonestar and Iceflame, as if wondering if they'd contradict me. Still, they allowed it, and Iceleaf followed me gratefully to the nursery.

Her belly gave an enormous rumble, and I saw her skinny frame.

"Did you ... are you alright?" I asked finally.

"There wasn't much to eat on the way here." Iceleaf averted my eyes.

"I'll get you something," I assured her. "There's a lot of prey in SeasonClan territory, and not that many cats."

I went to the fresh-kill pile and got a rabbit for Iceleaf as well as Wheatpelt's favorite thrush. I went back to the nursery and dropped the thrush at Wheatpelt's paws before going back to Iceleaf and giving her the rabbit.

"Was it far?" I asked her gently. Iceleaf looked delicate.

She nodded. "I ... I had only begun expecting when we left. It's been three moons." Glancing at her rounded belly, she added, "I'm not sure how much longer till I'll be kitting, and Cocoaleaf will be unfamiliar with the herbs here."

Perhaps that was my cue. "Emuwing will help," I assured her.

"Let all cats gather below the High Rock for a Clan meeting!" Stonestar called. I left the rabbit with Iceleaf and ran there.

"Oakkit, Darkkit and Lilykit, step forward."

Wait, what? Nothing about the rogues? I stared, confused, as Stonestar happily named mentors for the three new SeasonClan apprentices.

"Oakpaw, your mentor will be Woodfur."

That brought me back to the memory that Emuwing liked Woodfur. Hehe... like their relationship could ever happen. I would tease Emuwing, but it was a touchy subject.

"Darkpaw, your mentor will be Patienceheart."

Darkpaw definitely groaned upon realizing his mentor was a she-cat.

"And Lilypaw, your mentor will be Joyspirit."

All of his kits have apprentices now ... or had, I thought, faintly remembering Lovegrass.

"Also ... Lightcry, Sunstreak, Earthmist, Plumwhisker, Forestclaw, Iceleaf, Marshstep, Cocoaleaf, Blackfur and Mudwish, step forward."

I saw Iceleaf hesitantly leave the nursery and a half-eaten rabbit to go underneath the High Rock.

"I will assign you all mentors," He said.

No one protested about the fact that Iceleaf was expecting kits, so I did.

"Iceleaf's expecting," I reminded him.

"That does not matter," Stonestar said, and my hopes shattered. "She must prove herself to join."

What? But she was kitting any day now! I wanted to argue...

"Lightcry, you will join Heathermist and Fallowpaw. Earthmist, you will join Peacewind and Duckpaw. Sunstreak, you will join Cloudysky and Stripepaw. Plumwhisker, you will join Stormdawn and Swanpaw. Forestclaw, Iceleaf, Marshstep and Blackfur, you'll be joining Shadowheart's kits. Mudwish, you will be trained with Woodfur and Oakpaw. Cocoaleaf, you will be trained by Emuwing."

Iceleaf, training? I could see the horror in the queen's eyes, but it hardly matched the horror in Mudwish's. Clearly, he was her mate.

"Stonestar!" Mudwish gasped. "She can't"

"She'll do as I say, Mudwish."

Since when was Stonestar so heartless? I looked and saw the same merciless expression in Iceflame's eyes. What was going on?

I almost opened my mouth to speak, but Iceflame cut me off.

"Don't you dare, Stormdawn. Don't you dare. You're too outspoken for your own good!"

Iceleaf had gone through a week of training, and was only allowed to eat an apprentice's share. Her fatigue and hunger were showing. Lightcry and the others hid it, but it was harder for an expecting queen. I was pretty sure Mudwish gave half his prey to her as well, because he was getting skinnier.

I came over to check on them. They were all sleeping in the apprentices' den, too... they were all warriors! Seriously, there was something wrong with our leader and deputy!

"Hey." I looked over at Iceleaf and Mudwish. "Are you two okay?" I made sure there was concern in my voice, not sarcasm.

"We're fine," said Iceleaf tiredly, forcing out a smile.

"I'm fine, you're not," Mudwish corrected.

"I'm so sorry this is happening," I whispered. "This should never have happened. You came all the way here ... for this. It's not right. I don't know what's gotten into Stonestar and Iceflame." How come I

was apologizing for Stonestar and Iceflame's actions? But, no one else was doing it, so I had to.

Even Emuwing had agreed to these ridiculous decisions, and she was medicine cat! Really! What had been going on in that den? I'd eavesdropped every spare moment now, but still I was hearing nothing but arguments between the three.

Iceleaf sighed. "I've been getting cramps more and more often, and I think I'm overexerting myself."

She cast a sidelong glance at Mudwish before adding, "I kinda feel like I'm going to be kitting during training. If I'm kitting, would they still call me for training?"

I wanted with all of my heart to say no.

But really, I didn't have an answer anymore.

Iceleaf noted my silence and sighed. "I understand."

"I.... I wish I could tell you otherwise," I meowed heavily, "but I just don't know anymore."

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Nine

I secretly gave Iceleaf some more prey, then went to visit Emuwing and Cocoaleaf. I ran into Cocoaleaf first.

"Do you know what's going on?" she asked. "Emuwing is so nice during training, but she isn't doing anything about this! I mean, look at Iceleaf! And all our warriors! Stonestar is starving them!" She looked around wildly, as if expecting someone to eavesdrop. No one was, but her expression was still wild and terrified.

"They get all the leftover prey," I told her, trying to calm her down. Hopefully that was a good thing, but it would also make it seem like they only got the scraps.

Cocoaleaf glared at me. "But there's never much! Just the odd mouse or shrew, and that's hardly enough for Iceleaf! She's expecting kits!" Cocoaleaf was hysterical now. She kept glancing left and right and when she spotted Stonestar walking across camp her eyes burned with fury.

I sighed. "Believe me, Cocoaleaf. I never wanted any of this to happen."

She sighed. "You're the only decent cat in this bunch, Stormdawn."

After that, I took Swanpaw out for training. I suddenly remembered Plumwhisker was tagging along. She'd been training with Heathermist and Fallowpaw for some reason, but now she was back on track. I wondered why she'd followed Heaethermist and Fallowpaw in the first place, but I certainly wouldn't argue.

"All right, you two can spar it out," I said. Great StarClan, Plumwhisker was older than me! What was going on? I didn't want to train a cat so much older than me! By my standards, Plumwhisker was ancient!

The two sparred, and Plumwhisker completely destroyed Swanpaw.

I could see the anguish in my white apprentice's eyes.

"Can I have a break?" she asked me softly, her eyes pleading.

I nodded. "Go have a drink by the stream." Happily, Swanpaw obliged and ran off to quickly drink from the shallow stream.

Then I turned back to Plumwhisker. "You and me are fighting now."

Her eyes narrowed and she lunged. I twisted to the side and used my back legs to whack hers, and she fell to the ground with an oomph! Giving her no time to recover, I jumped to my feet and swiped her across her mouth, then kicked her hard in the chest. She lay, winded, on her side.

I looked at her and cocked my head. "You're going to need to be stronger."

Plumwhisker proved a decent warrior, but no match for me. I trashed her every time, even if she demolished Swanpaw. I gave Swanpaw one-on-one training whenever I could (which was all the time, because I disliked Plumwhisker), and her skills were improving rapidly. Thank StarClan for that, because Plumwhisker was showing no signs of improvement in learning our forest techniques, and she couldn't fight that well at all. I was getting incredibly frustrated with her.

"Alright, let's go hunting," I said, giving up on training Plumwhisker in battle.

Plumwhisker curled her lip. "What's the point? No matter how much I bring back, I only ever get a mouse!"

"Maybe you and Swanpaw can share something plump," I said. "If Swanpaw takes it, and agrees to share with you..."

"I don't," Swanpaw snarled hatefully.

I whipped around. "Huh?" Swanpaw was normally so gentle and softspoken, never hateful of anyone, but the way her lip curled and she spoke so hatefully...

"Can you and I talk, alone?" Swanpaw asked.

"Okay. Plumwhisker, go join Lightcry, Heathermist and Fallowpaw." I turned back to my apprentice. "Yes?"

"I... I get uncomfortable around her," Swanpaw meowed hoarsely. "It's so scary! Like she's trying to attack me all the time. All of them! That Lightcry has this burning gaze, and Sunstreak and Earthmist pick fights with everybody. I don't want them to join the Clan, Feathermist's descendants or not! I think their blood is filled too much with rogue!"

I nodded. "I know it's hard." I didn't really understand, because I'd never really had a problem with them, though.

Swanpaw sighed. "They should only take in Cocoaleaf, Iceleaf and Mudwish. They're the only nice cats. And maybe Lightcry. She's intimidating, but not so bad."

"Stormdawn!"

I heard Iceflame calling my voice, and whipped around. "Yes?"

"Iceleaf's training with you today," she said, "And I'm watching. I want you to go full-out on her, Stormdawn."

I would've argued, but there was absolutely nothing I could do if Iceflame was watching. But I didn't need to go full-out.

I was nimble and agile. I dodged all of Iceleaf's clumsily played blows but didn't harm a whisker on her.

"STORMDAWN! ATTACK HER!" Iceflame bellowed.

Iceflame raised her voice. "Give it your ALL! Imagine she's a FOX!" Iceflame spoke extremely ferociously, like she herself believed Iceleaf was as dangerous as a fox. I knew Iceleaf was nowhere near that dangerous, but...

I knew what Iceflame expected of me, and I had no choice.

I blinked at Iceleaf, and said the single word: "Sorry."

The next hour passed with Iceflame heartlessly making me attack Iceleaf with all my might. I had struck, nipped and kicked every inch of Iceleaf I could reach, including her swollen belly. She looked so in pain, and I was regretful about it. I held back each time her eyes clouded with pain, but there was only so much I could do to help her. Hold back, and Iceflame would scold me. Not attack at all, Iceflame would probably replace me. Fight her with all my might, and it would damage Iceleaf, but keep my position in the Clan safe.

Finally, Iceleaf just collapsed. "Break?" she whispered. I nodded, but Iceflame shook her head.

"I'm tired," I told her.

Iceflame shrugged. "Iceleaf, you'll fight ME then!"

I knew that was way, way worse, but there was absolutely nothing I could do now. I had already told Iceflame I was fatigued, and if I went back on my word now, Iceflame would doubt me in the near future. That was something I could not allow.

Iceflame attacked Iceleaf way faster than I had, her moves coming in rapid-fire. Her swollen belly slowing her movements, there was no way Iceleaf could keep up. She was hit by many blows, over and over again, and Iceflame seemed to be deliberately aiming for her belly. It winded Iceleaf each time and caused her great pain. It was a miracle Iceleaf hadn't started kitting yet.

Finally, Iceleaf just fainted from the exhaustion.

"Tsk!" Iceflame snorted. "What a sorry excuse for a cat! Stormdawn, Swanpaw, bring her back to camp. I'm going to join Mudwish's training session with Woodfur and Oakpaw."

"Mudwish and Iceleaf? Isn't this a bit targeted?" I asked.

Iceflame narrowed her eyes. "Don't make me hate you, Stormdawn." It was strange, hearing those words coming from the grandmother who had been a mother to me.

I had no idea what was going on. Literally no idea. I hoisted Iceleaf

onto my back, Swanpaw helping from the back, and we brought her back to camp. Unfortunately for us, Mudwish was in camp. He looked up as we entered, and shock crossed his face as he saw Iceleaf's unconscious body between us.

"Iceleaf!" he cried, running up to her. "Is she dead?"

"She fainted," Swanpaw answered helpfully, "from overexertion. She was fighting Stormdawn for an hour, and then Iceflame for about ten minutes."

Mudwish glared at me. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"There is absolutely nothing I can do with the deputy watching me!" I snarled furiously. "Believe it or not, Mudwish, I am not risking my position in the Clan for you!"

His eyes widened, and then he sighed. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But she needs medical attention. She'll be kitting any day now. She should be resting!"

"That is something I intend to do," I said. "Tomorrow, tell Iceleaf to cough and cough a lot. Swanpaw and I will go into hysterics and say she'll make us all sick, so she should be confined to the medicine den. I'm sure Emuwing won't consent to throwing a sick cat out."

"So she'll miss training." It dawned on Mudwish.

"And if you're lucky," I added, "she'll kit tomorrow. Newborns need their mother, and that's another thing Emuwing won't risk."

I walked off after that, telling Swanpaw to get some rest before the mini Gathering that night, with us meeting up with the cats who lived by the stream.

I brought some prey to share with Wheatpelt. She was there with her kits – Skykit, Fluffykit and Nightkit, but she didn't look very interested in them. Fluffykit ran up to me.

"Stormdawn!" she squeaked excitedly.

"Where have you been?" Wheatpelt asked dully. "It's like you only care about Iceleaf nowadays!"

"You've already kitted, haven't you?"

Honestly, I'd grown to dislike Wheatpelt these past moons. Any more of this attitude and I wouldn't be there at all, no matter what I'd promised.

I was pretty sure Wheatpelt could see that in my eyes, and my short temper nowadays.

"This isn't enough for us to share." Wheatpelt pawed the rabbit.

"Who said we're sharing?" I asked dryly, and exited the den.

Wheatpelt didn't call after me, instead, she watched me go sorrowfully, without saying a word, and turned back to her kits, whatever energy she might've had gone. Skykit and Fluffykit watched Wheatpelt unhappily, and Nightkit stared after me accusingly, but I didn't look back, and saw none of it.

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Updated Allegiances

Leader: Stonestar – gray tom with amber eyes

Deputy: Iceflame – white she-cat with orangey patches and green eyes

apprentice, Mistpaw

Medicine cat: Emuwing – golden-brown she-cat with black spots and green eyes

apprentice, Cocoaleaf

Warriors: Flametail – red tom with yellow eyes

Ashdust – blackish-gray tom with amber eyes

apprentice, Duskypaw

Silkpelt – whitish-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Amberfire – orangey-red she-cat with green eyes

Stargleam – yellowish-golden she-cat with pale amber eyes

Graymist – gray she-cat with misty blue eyes

Echoheart – storm-colored she-cat (dark gray) with green eyes

Riversong – gray-blue she-cat with dark blue eyes

Streamwhisker – silver she-cat with green eyes

Browntail – black tom with a brown tail and amber eyes

Leafshine – tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Woodfur – brown tom with amber eyes

apprentice, Oakpaw

Heathermist – pinkish-gray she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Fallowpaw

Frogleap – grayish-green tom with amber eyes

Wormtail – brown tom with amber eyes

Spidertail – white-and-black tom with a tortoiseshell ear and amber eyes

apprentice, Morningpaw

Dogspring – brown tom with amber eyes

Spiketail – tortoiseshell tom with spiky-looking fur and yellow eyes

Hollowmist – brown tom with yellow eyes

Sandwhisker – pale ginger tom with green eyes

Firespring – fire-colored tom with ginger patches and blue eyes

Coriandermist – white she-cat with yellow eyes

Joyspirit – golden she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Lilypaw

Peacewind – white she-cat with purple eyes

apprentice, Duckpaw

Patienceheart – reddish-brown she-cat with sapphire eyes

apprentice, Darkpaw

Sunbright – bright yellow she-cat

apprentice, Sunnypaw

Goldenwind – golden she-cat with green eyes

Appledawn – red she-cat with orangey splotches and blue eyes

Cloudysky – gray-and-white tom with pale blue eyes

apprentice, Stripepaw

Stormdawn – silver she-cat with violet eyes

apprentice, Swanpaw

Lightmist - misty-colored she-cat with amber eyes

Shadowheart - black she-cat with green eyes

Ashenface - brown she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices: Swanpaw - white she-cat with blue eyes

Fallowpaw - tortoiseshell she-cat with gray eyes

Duckpaw - yellow tom with dark blue eyes

Stripepaw - striped brown tom with amber eyes

Oakpaw - brown tom with blue eyes

Darkpaw - black tom with amber eyes

Lilypaw - pinkish-white she-cat with blue eyes

CloudClan cats: Lightcry - snow-white she-cat with amber eyes

Sunstreak - orangey tom with amber eyes

Earthmist - brownish-gray tom with blue eyes

Iceleaf - white and tortoiseshell she-cat

Mudwish - brown tom with green eyes

Forestclaw - tortoiseshell tom with dark blue eyes

Plumwhisker - gray she-cat with green eyes

Marshstep - brownish-gray tom with amber eyes

Blackfur - black tom with amber eyes

Cocoaleaf - brown-and-tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Queens: Starrynight – mother to Dogspring's kits: Honeykit and Hivekit

Wheatpelt – mother to Eagletail's kits: Skykit, Nightkit and Fluffykit

Appledawn – mother to Dawnkit, Twilightkit and Chivekit

Amberfire – expecting Woodfur's kits

Cats outside Clans:

Littlecloud – former SeasonClan cat, brother of Emuwing

Hazelshade – former SeasonClan cat, daughter of Amberfire (Yes! Not Iceflame!)

Eagletail – former SeasonClan cat, brother of Spidertail. Former mate of Wheatpelt. Current mate of Kyla

Kyla – kittypet, mate of Eagletail

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Ten

"Mistfur! Duskypelt! Morningclaw! Sunnyheart! Mistfur! Duskypelt! Morningclaw! Sunnyheart!"

The Clan cheered the new warriors' names as loudly as possible. I hoped I was among them. After all, they deserved some support. But not that I loved Duskypelt or anything, they were just the Clan's newest warriors and they always got support from the Clan. My warriors' ceremony had been quieter than this, with only a few people nervously chanting my name. But here, the Clan was full-out, excited. Duskypelt was looking at me happily, his cheeriness infectious, but...

I couldn't love him. Never. He was likable, but not my type. I hated having two toms padding after me. Absolutely ridiculous. And I hardly knew Cloudysky too. He'd barely known me before he started padding after me, and I still didn't know him very well. Not that I was making the effort. I wished they would stop, but toms would be toms. They were always so stubborn, it was infuriating.

I headed to the nursery before turning back. I didn't want to have anything to do with Wheatpelt anymore. But I grabbed a few pieces of prey for the queens and went there. After all, the apprentices were always neglecting their duties. I rolled my eyes as I saw Lilypaw and Oakpaw play-fighting under the sun while the queens were quietly unfed and hungry. Almost giggling to myself, I brought the prey to the queens.

The queens all purred gratefully, but Wheatpelt accepted hers quietly, shooting me an odd look. I didn't know what that was about and ended up discussing Browntail with Appledawn for some reason.

"He's very overbearing," Appledawn told me. "Dawnkit doesn't like him. Chivekit is the only kit here who's okay with him."

"What a trashy father," I said. Then realizing what I said, I gasped,

"Oh! Sorry!"

Appledawn just laughed. "It's fine. I kinda miss Goldenwind ... we used to hang out a lot. But she's so engrossed in warrior duties! I used to think my brother padded after her, but now he loves a silver she-cat." It was already a dead giveaway before she added, "Who has purple eyes."

"Oi! What?" I demanded as she laughed.

"Both my brothers, actually," she said. "Duskypelt and Cloudysky. Have you picked yet?"

"What?" I could feel my pelt growing hot. "No." Why was she talking about love, with me? All this nonsense about love. Browntail, about her, first, and now the cats who had crushes on me? Appledawn really couldn't tell when a subject was touchy, could she?

"They've been padding after you for ages, especially that Duskypelt," Appledawn informed me.

"For an unfathomable reason," I mumbled under my breath. Appledawn laughed again, a short, slightly high-pitched laugh.

"You're bold and a good fighter, as well as pretty and young. That's attractive," she informed me matter-of-factly.

"I'm not interested," I responded. She sighed and turned back to her own kits.

After that, I said a quick farewell to the queens and left to get a meal of my own.

"Hey, Stormdawn..."

"That sounds so childish, you mouse-brain!"

"How about this, Hey Stormdawn, d'you wanna share prey, cos I'm really cool and stuff"

"NO, Cloudysky, that's ridiculous!"

"Hey, why are you judging me? I'm the one sharing prey with her, not you!"

"Shush, you! She's standing in front of us!"

"Huh?" I looked around, confused. Who was arguing about sharing prey with me? The voices were evidently Duskypelt's and Cloudysky's, but I had no idea why they were fighting over who could share prey with me. I mean, I was obviously not going to share prey with either of them. With toms, I was awfully anti-social.

"As I was saying," said Duskypelt.

"Do you want to share prey?" Cloudysky asked cheekily, shooting Duskypelt a triumphant look, all the while kind of smiling at me.

Duskypelt glared at him.

I sighed. "I don't. You two can stop squabbling."

Both sported a hurt expression. I almost laughed. "Look, you two are really cute and all. But this isn't really funny."

"Er," said Duskypelt. "I mean, I told you how I felt."

"And I told you how I felt," I retorted. "You two just stop coming to me. 'Oh, Stormdawn! Let's present you with today's woes. I'm sure you're interested.'" Actually, neither of them had said that. But both assumed it was the other and stared at each other in shock, and both interpreted the shock as not realizing I was that aware.

With a delicate laugh, I picked up a thrush from the pile.

"Hey! That's a pretty big thrush, even for you! Are you keen on sharing it?"

I might've said yes, if it was any cat but the one who's identical violet eyes were staring straight back at me brightly, glowing with excitement.

"What's so exciting about a thrush?" I muttered grouchily to my mother.

"Hey! Come on! You're too young to be woey-woey!" Peacewind called. She was beaming, trying to look cheerful. I mean, she was doing a good job, at that. She was looking quite cheerful. But still. Was that supposed to be attractive?

"I don't know what in StarClan is woey-woey, but I'm not that," I responded, gingerly lifting up the thrush and padding away. I saw Peacewind look at me directly, her violet eyes clouding with confusion and maybe sadness. I might've been sorry if she hadn't ignored me my entire childhood.

"Well." I heard a voice from beside me. "Might you share that with me?"

I saw Wheatpelt looking at me haughtily.

"Did I not give you a rabbit a few moments ago?" This time, unlike the usual, I wasn't teasing. It was a threat. I'd grown further away from Wheatpelt recently. She had been like a mother to me, but maybe I just wasn't great with mothers. I narrowed my eyes at her, annoyance and anger building inside of me. It had been there, but overtime, the anger I'd felt at her had grown, and I no longer ignored it.

"You promised," she said coldly, "to help me raise my kits. You did so in the first moon or so. I hardly see you nowadays." She raised her eyebrows, as if that was supposed to be amusing.

"It's hardly my duty," I retorted. "I'm raising them about as much as a Clanmate should."

"You're not raising them as a Clanmate!" Wheatpelt snapped. "You're raising them as a replacement father!"

"Of the wrong gender, apparently. Am I also replacing their absolutely distant mother?" I retorted. "I don't want anything to do with the kits anymore, Wheatpelt. I've seen you change, and you're not the Wheatpelt I once knew. What happened to that gentle she-cat who cared? You really, really changed." I didn't know if she'd changed, or if I had. But, either way, I wanted nothing to do with Nightkit, Skykit or Fluffykit anymore. I turned around, waiting for

her to go before she did. She didn't go, so I did.

Wheatpelt's eyes burned into my back, but she didn't respond and let me leave.

"Now, I assume you're hogging that thrush."

The voice was not new. I sighed. "Cloudysky," I meowed, "I did tell you to go away." I really was frustrated with them. The two of them, and then Wheatpelt.

"Did you?" he asked. "I believe the exact words were 'You two can stop coming to me. 'Oh, Stormdawn! Let me share with you today's woe'"

"Okay, I get it!" I growled impatiently.

Cloudysky smiled. "Now. That thrush is slightly big for you."

"No, it isn't," I said. "Not when I've been training Swanpaw all day!"

"Swanpaw and Iceleaf," He corrected. "And not all day."

"Iceleaf is one matter." I stared off into the sky. "What is Stonestar thinking?"

Maybe Cloudysky was glad he'd sparked some sort of conversation with me. Maybe he felt the same. But either way, he began seriously discussing the prospect of Iceleaf getting injured during training. I hadn't seen this serious side of him before – only the joker, easygoing tom I'd grown to know.

If he really did had this serious side, maybe we weren't such a bad match after all.

Stop it, Stormdawn, I told myself. You're not looking for a mate. After all, two toms. Two easygoing toms, two kits of Shadowheart and Firespring, both padding after you. This is a bad choice going. Neither of them were right for me, and I wanted neither of them.

I laughed to myself softly, and Cloudysky's ears perked.

"Is Iceleaf's situation funny?" he demanded, almost haughty about it.

I twitched my ears with amusement. "No. I was thinking about something."

"Your mind meandered, did it?" he asked.

I looked him in the eye. "Yes," I said seriously.

He smiled. "Well. D'you want to train Stripepaw and Swanpaw together tomorrow? The two of them could do with some – uh – couple time."

"What now?" I asked. Stripepaw did not like Swanpaw ... did he?

"Anyway, who's training with you?" I asked softly.

"Sunstreak," he responded. "Be lucky you don't have him."

"Sunstreak and Plumwhisker," I said dully. "Two of my least favorite cats. Well, at least we didn't get Earthmist. But I really wish I'd gotten Lightcry instead."

"Still," Cloudysky insisted, "we also might get Iceleaf."

"I hope we don't," I responded. "With Iceleaf comes Iceflame, and that is a bad idea."

"Maybe it is."

"Are you deliberately agreeing with me?" I was starting to find Cloudysky annoying. Did he or Duskypelt not have minds of their own? They always agreed with me. Always. I would want a mate – if I ever did – that spoke up for himself. Not some meek cat who followed everything I said. I wanted a cat who would point out my flaws, improve me.

Cloudysky and Duskypelt were both proving not to be that cat.

"I am not," he meowed decisively and fiercely, already more challenging than Duskypelt. "Also. Sunstreak is so insufferable!"

I let out a nervous laugh. "I was the first cat who met him, hello! Lightcry has them as bodyguards. Bodyguards, literally! When they aren't off training, Earthmist and Sunstreak tail her everywhere!"

"Don't you find them a little suspicious?" Cloudysky asked.

Finally. A thought of his own. But not one that I liked. "What do you mean?" I asked quietly. "They're Feathermist's descendants."

But Cloudysky was already shaking his head, slowly but firmly. "They could be lying," he said finally. "Rogues nearby could've heard about SeasonClan from the old days. They told their mates, who passed on to the children, and Lightcry – who seems like a nice cat – conceives a plan. Now. Who would suspect Peaceheart's descendants? But what if they weren't? What if they were pretending? Would you still trust them then?"

My eyes had rounded in horror as every word he said registered. It was true, though. None of them bore any resemblance to Peaceheart. None of them were pure white like her, or silver like Feathermist, or black like Ravenheart.

Most importantly: None of them, not one, had violet eyes.

I should've realized before.

"Let's see Iceleaf's kits first," I meowed. "If any of them have violet eyes – it's a chance."

Cloudysky's gaze hardened. "We'll see, will we?"

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Eleven

I was training Swanpaw with Iceflame, Iceleaf and Plumwhisker when Iceleaf suddenly and unexpectedly started kitting. The overexertion from facing off Iceflame for two hours had gotten to her body, and she was weak from training to begin with. I asked Iceflame to call Emuwing, desperately, hoping she would at least show some sympathy for the poor queen.

The deputy didn't move a muscle.

So, instead, Swanpaw and I ran back to camp to get Emuwing and Cocoaleaf. And, apparently, Emuwing was showing Cocoaleaf where to collect herbs, and none of us knew where those herbs were.

So I went back to the training hollow. I found Emuwing already there – maybe she'd heard Iceleaf's cries.

"She's so, so weak," Emuwing whispered. "I don't think she's going to make it." Suddenly, she rounded on Iceflame. "I told you this was a bad idea! This is not you! Be yourself, Iceflame. Stonestar may have changed but I know you are still the same cat!"

What? All this? Was Iceflame just following Stonestar's lead all this while? Like a tamed dog? What was going on?!

"I am who I'm meant to be," Iceflame meowed evenly. "If Stonestar wants me to be like this, so be it. I trust him completely." Her green eyes showed she obviously believed something else – but I could see the trust for her mate there, built through years of companionship. I could understand that trust. But surely Iceflame of all cats could see he'd changed.

"Iceflame," I said gently.

Iceflame looked away. "I care for them. Those cats. Iceleaf. I did. But ... if Stonestar wants me to be tough..." She shook her head. "I don't know what's going on with him! He's your grandfather, he

must've treated you lovingly, can you try talking to him?"

"He was never around for me," I snorted. I heard more of Iceleaf's wails. "Where's Mudwish?" I asked softly.

"Training," Iceflame meowed shortly, "with Woodfur and Oakpaw. You can ask Amberfire where they're training."

"Why?" I asked curiously.

"You know, they're mates. Amberfire is expecting their first litter."

Already! I felt so sorry for Emuwing. Having a crush on Woodfur. Wasting her time.

"Yeah. First. What, so funny? You're not the only one who sees how Emuwing looks at Woodfur. But, she's a medicine cat, and not supposed to be romancy, so maybe this is good for her. Woodfur isn't Amberfire's first mate anyways. She had Birdcry first, although they never had kits together. He died, like, two moons after they mated. It was really sad. And no one thought Dawnstream was Amberfire's mother either, so she couldn't talk to her."

It was true. I had seen Amberfire and Dawnstream share tongues on several occasions, but I'd assumed they were close. Dawnstream always looked young, so I'd never – absolutely never – thought she could possibly be Amberfire's mother.

"Also, something else," Iceflame said reluctantly. "Wheatpelt asked me to talk to you."

"What?" I asked sharply. "Her?"

"You had a falling out?" she asked sympathetically. "Wheatpelt said she was harsh, and she's sorry."

I shook my head. "Sorry, is she? Never mind. Tell her she's forgiven, but we're just Clanmates from now on."

I looked through Iceflame into the nursery. I'd just caught sight of Wheatpelt curled around her three kits and I strained to hear them.

"Mama! Mama, why don't you play anymore?"

"Mama! Why did that silver cat stop coming?"

"Was she our older sister?"

"Mama! Mama!"

"Stormdawn!"

I blinked, stopped listening into the nursery and looking through Iceflame and stared at the deputy.

"...yes?" I asked uncertainly.

"You were staring straight at me, it was creepy," Iceflame muttered. "Is something going on?"

"No," I said untruthfully.

Iceflame sighed. "I have duties to attend to. Are you going to see Amberfire about Mudwish or not?"

I blinked again. "Oh! Right."

I went to the nursery, greeted Appledawn in a friendly way and stopped next to Amberfire. I'd seen Wheatpelt's eyes widen hopefully, but as soon as I paused in front of the orangey-red queen, her eyes darkened and she turned back to her kits.

"Mama! The silver cat came back!"

"Hush!" Wheatpelt scolded. "She's not the same cat. This is ... Stormdusk."

"What in the name of StarClan, Wheatpelt?" I growled.

Wheatpelt glared at me. "They remember Stormdawn as a cat who cared! So you're Stormdusk. Stormdawn died."

I shook my head and turned back to Amberfire. "Hey. Where did Woodfur and Oakpaw go training?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Mudwish is with them," I responded. "And Iceleaf is kitting."

"Oh," she nodded in acceptance. "Sandy hollow."

At the mention of Iceleaf, Wheatpelt's eyes had narrowed further – did she ever do anything but narrow her eyes? She sighed deeply and pushed a crushed moss ball to her kits. Fluffykit threw it desperately to Nightkit, who flung it at Skykit's head.

I named them, I thought. I have a connection to them. But I didn't. I used to have a connection with their mother. That was over. I didn't care about those kits. They were nice, but ... their mother betrayed me, in some way.

Could I not trust anyone?

I padded down to the sandy hollow. Oakpaw and Mudwish were sparring.

"Hey, Stormdawn!" Woodfur called. "Are you with Swanpaw? Do you want to train together?"

"Unfortunately not," I shook my head. "I let Swanpaw rest. I wanted to borrow Mudwish."

Woodfur frowned, then shrugged. "Okay. If it's about Iceleaf in the nursery, say hi to Amberfire for me!"

I nodded to Mudwish and the two of us set off.

"What happened?" Mudwish asked in a low voice. "Is she kitting?"

I nodded slowly. "And Emuwing doesn't think she's going to make it. She started kitting after two hours of training straight."

"WHAT?" he bellowed.

I sighed. "I'm sorry. Iceflame was following Stonestar's orders. He's mad, Mudwish. Completely crazy, but Iceflame loved him."

Mudwish sighed. "I love her so much, Stormdawn. I thought having kits would be the best thing. But... after all the training she's been put through ... I wish we hadn't decided to have kits."

"Mudwish..." I responded sorrowfully, but there was nothing I could say.

He shook his head. "It's fine. You're the best cat in this ruddy Clan, Stormdawn. That's all I have to say to you."

I felt warmth bubble up in my chest. Someone actually thanked me, complimented me. That made a first.

Thank you, StarClan, for this, I thought. I had needed that. Emuwing was my friend but she wasn't the grateful type.

Mudwish and I went to the hollow, but only Swanpaw was there, waiting for us. "They brought Iceleaf back to camp," she told me. "I don't know why they risked moving her, but Emuwing said it would be safer if all her herbs were there."

Mudwish and I raced back to camp. It was almost friendly, playful, if Mudwish hadn't been so frantic. I watched him go in terror for his mate. Someday, I thought. Someday I might be like him. But until then... I wasn't ready for a mate.

No matter the two toms behind me staring straight at my back.

"It's rude to stare, you know," I said tartly, turning around. Cloudysky and Duskypelt both jumped.

"Erm... er... not staring," Cloudysky said innocently, looking away.

"I loved you first," came Duskypelt's reply. I laughed.

"Loved me first, did you? If you loved me, you'd leave me alone."

"Bloody ridiculous," Cloudysky muttered under his breath.

I smiled slightly, then headed to the medicine den. Iceleaf was still crying and screaming, although the screaming sounded weaker now.

Mudwish stepped out. "Stormdawn?" his voice was husky with grief. "Can you go in? I have no idea what to say, but you ... you have a way with words. Help her. Please."

I nodded and walked in. Iceleaf lay on the ground weakly, blood pouring out around her, and yet there were no signs of kits. The branch she'd been biting her splintered already, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Her eyes glazed with pain.

"Iceleaf," I whispered. "Iceleaf. You can't leave Mudwish. You have to stay strong. Do you want to raise kits with him?"

"...yes," Iceleaf whispered weakly.

"Then hang on," I murmured softly and gently.

"But..." she choked. "I'm not Iceleaf. I'm Ice." She coughed weakly. "Stormdawn. Lightcry lied. We're not Feathermist's descendants. She lied..."

Then, Iceleaf's eyes closed.

Emuwing shook her head. "She's gone," she said. "Blood loss. Stormdawn... can you cut open her belly?"

I stared at her.

"We might be able to rescue the kits inside," Emuwing pressed.

"*By cutting open a cat? Emuwing, are you MAD?!*"

"Yeah, I probably am," Emuwing sighed. "But really. Iceleaf is far gone, and she'd want her kits to live. Starrynight or Wheatpelt could nurse them, or Appledawn. They'll be okay, but you need to get them out."

I knew what the problem was. Emuwing couldn't cut open Iceleaf because she just wouldn't. And she thought I was some savage murderer?

"How long can the kits last?" I asked.

"Until Iceleaf's body goes cold. Maybe an hour," Emuwing responded.

"I'm going to get Mudwish," I said, and walked out. "He can make the choice."

He was right outside, pacing in anticipation. He looked up immediately when I came out, then stopped when he saw my downcast eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "She died. But the kits are still inside her, very much alive. You have to make the decision: Do you want to cut her open and retrieve your kits?"

Mudwish's eyes widened. "Cut her open?" he repeated. I saw the shock and horror on his face, and I could understand. No cat, absolutely no cat, would want to cut his mate open, especially not the mate he really loved. But, there was no choice, was there? It was leave Iceleaf's body as it was and let the kits inside her die, or cut her open, make her look not-so-nice anymore, but save his kits. The last memory he would have of Iceleaf.

"It sounds ridiculous," I sighed. "I know. But do you?" I looked at him hopefully. I didn't want to cut her open, but those kits shouldn't have to die.

Mudwish sighed. "If she's already gone ... do it."

I nodded and walked back inside. Emuwing transfixed me with a glowing stare.

"Right, do it," she meowed, just a bit squeakily. I sighed.

"I'm just as nervous as you are," I meowed to her gravely.

Emuwing still looked freaked, but she meowed, "You... just hurry! The kits will grow weaker if they stay in their dead mother's body."

I sighed and took a long, deep breath.

And raked my claws across Iceleaf's belly.

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Twelve

Two kits mewled at Starrynight's belly. Honeykit and Hivekit were pretty much weaned, so she was okay to nurse. Mudwish had named them: Frostkit and Sunkit. He hadn't named any of them after Iceleaf, but Frostkit was pretty much as close as it got without copying her name, so I supposed that was fine.

I suddenly remembered something Iceleaf had told me: that she was Ice, and they were all rogues, and Lightcry was fooling us. I needed to confirm that with Mudwish, but I hoped he wasn't too sad to answer.

Mudwish was quietly watching his sleeping kits, sorrow in his eyes. Frostkit was the splitting image of Iceleaf, and must be a painful reminder to him.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

He looked up. I saw tear tracks on his face.

"Are you Mud?" I asked.

He cocked his head.

"Something Iceleaf said," I told him. "She said she was Ice, you're not Feathermist's descendants, and Lightcry lied. Is this all true?"

Mudwish sighed. "Yeah. It is. Lightcry's great-great-great-great-grandmother was Feathermist's kin, but her blood is so tainted now by rogues. She was determined to find you, though. Lightcry is a descendant of Feathermist. No one else is. I mean, I know Sunstreak is her brother, and Earthmist is her sister. But only those three. None of the rest."

"Okay," I said softly. "Thank you."

Thinking about that, I padded away.

"Hey – um – Stormdawn! Do you want to share prey in a completely Clanmate way?"

I looked up. Cloudysky.

"Okay," I said finally. "Since it's in a Clanmate way. Go grab some prey, will you? I need to talk to Heathermist."

I walked over to Heathermist as she chatted with – ugh – my mother.

"Heathermist!" I called.

She looked up. "Oh, hi, Stormdawn."

"I can train Swanpaw tomorrow," I confirmed. "Sorry for making you do that."

She shook her head. "It's no big deal." Then she lowered her voice so Peacewind couldn't hear her. "Made any advance on those toms? I can see you finally agreed to Cloudysky."

I sighed. "It's in a Clanmate way, Heathermist."

"Or so you think." She winked playfully.

Shaking my head in mock anger, I strolled over to the same place I'd left before going to talk to Heathermist. Cloudysky was waiting there, talking to Duskypelt, whose jaw had just dropped. I rolled my eyes.

"Woah," Duskypelt was saying. "Seriously? You guys gonna be mates or something?"

"No," I said.

Cloudysky and Duskypelt jerked around, staring at me.

"No gossip," I said. "Because this is in a completely Clanmate way."

"You know," said Cloudysky, "when I said Clanmate, I meant like, Clan mate, you know, with a spacing. Your mate in the Clan."

I stared at him through slitted eyes. "Eat your prey yourself." I stalked off. I couldn't even share polite prey with him without him talking about us being mates. Looked like I wasn't going to ever share prey with him, even in a Clanmate way, if that meant 'Clan mate'. Seriously, did he twist everything he said?

I took something for myself – a thrush – and went to share with Swanpaw.

"Sorry I haven't been very involved," I apologized to her.

She smiled. "It's okay! I like training with Fallowpaw anyway. Anyway ... these Feathermist descendants are creeping me out. Heathermist already trains two of us so she didn't need a third."

"Oh, okay," I nodded reassuringly.

I took a few famished bites of the thrush and then Swanpaw asked, "Can I have the feathers?" She smiled sheepishly.

I gave her a funny look. "For yourself, or the elders?"

She giggled. "Oh, um, both."

It was quite funny how she relaxed around me. I mean, I'd seen how nervous and shy she was around Heathermist. What was it about me? Most people had hated me until a few moons ago, when I'd been made a warrior. People like Minnowpelt. Emuwing.

"Oh, also," said Swanpaw, "Wheatpelt wanted to see you. She told me to pass along the message."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, fine. I told her everything she needs to know already."

Swanpaw shrugged. "I dunno. When d'you think they'll make me a warrior? I've only been an apprentice for a week, and Stonestar seems like a psychopath."

"Shh!" I hissed, as Iceflame walked by. "Don't say that! Just because he is doesn't mean you say that in camp!"

"Wait, what?" asked Swanpaw. "You agree??"

I nodded ever so slightly. Yes, I did agree, and yes, Stonestar was a psychopath. Man.

"Well..." Swanpaw finished up the thrush and scooped up the feathers. "I'll see you tomorrow!" She looked suddenly much more energetic than before as she raced off with the feathers.

"Yep!" I called after her. "At DAWN, don't you forget!"

I heard a groan as she ran into the apprentice den and laughed. So, she wasn't giving them to the elders after all.

Now – for the more unpleasant job. I went to the nursery. Mudwish was still there watching over Frostkit and Sunkit. My mind was instantly brought back to the falseness of CloudClan's lineage.

"Hey! It's Stormdawn! She's back!"

"Stormdawn! Stormdawn!"

I expected to see Fluffykit, Nightkit and Skykit bouncing. But instead, it was Starrynight and Appledawn's kits, Honeykit, Hivekit, Dawnkit, Twilightkit and Chivekit.

"Hello!" I called back to them.

"Can you give us badger rides?" Twilightkit squealed excitedly.

I feigned an almost-faint. "All of you? No way."

I expected some 'me too!'s from Wheatpelt's kits, but the three of them were sitting stiffly away from me. Well, not like I cared anymore.

"Can you be my mentor when I'm ready?" asked Honeykit.

"Isn't that today?" Hivekit asked.

"That," meowed Starrynight, "is in three moons."

"Four moons for you," Appledawn told her kits.

Wheatpelt opened her mouth as if to say four moons for her kits too, then thought better of it and closed her mouth.

"Let's play a game!" Dawnkit suddenly meowed. "Stormdawn! Can you be a rogue? The enemy! Hooray!"

"I never agreed," I responded childishly.

"Too bad!" Hivekit laughed. "We're the game masters, and you don't have an opinion!" I pretended to look shocked and Hivekit looked triumphant.

"Mom, Mom, can you be a rogue too?" Honeykit begged.

Starrynight nodded. "And Appledawn?"

"If you recall," said Appledawn, "I'm one of the most renowned fighters in the Clan."

"Well ... that's true ..." mumbled Chivekit. "But please... Mom?" He looked so desperate that Appledawn was forced to give in.

"Okay," mumbled Appledawn.

"I can join in too," Amberfire came. "I'll be your ... person to protect!"

I laughed. She probably wanted to play, but her extremely rounded belly would make that difficult.

"Can you look after those two instead?" Starrynight asked, gently pushing Frostkit and Sunkit over to her.

"Oh, okay."

I could tell. The way Starrynight pushed them away. They way Amberfire grudgingly took them instead of playing with Starrynight and Appledawn's kits. Nobody wanted them there, did they?

"It's fine," I said dismissively. "I'll watch them."

Amberfire looked up. Her features were shocked, but they were

feigned. So fake. So, so fake.

"Don't make your feelings so obvious."

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Never mind," I muttered. "I mean, you're giving a lot away by your expression. You don't want Frostkit or Sunkit, do you?"

"Who does?" Amberfire muttered. "I mean, they're innocent little kits. But these CloudClan ... they're so sus! None of them have Peaceheart and Feathermist's purple eyes. None of them. It obvious. They aren't kin to them. I even heard Forestclaw before – he told Sunstreak to call him Forest. And Sunstreak was like 'our days as Forest and Sun are over, pal. I know you miss the simple names, but this is so much better.' I mean, come on, Stormdawn. You're not that stupid."

"I never was," I mumbled softly. She backtracked.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I mean, I'm sure ... they're nice fellas. I might keep them round, until my kits are born. But I can read your face too. You know something, Stormdawn. You know something."

"Huh ... know what?" I feigned dumbness. It was a dumb move, but I was pretending to be dumb anyway, and what could I say? Iceleaf trusted me. I didn't know if she wanted to give herself and Lightcry completely away – but she'd told me, and I'd seen that desperation. She'd been guilty, and she wanted to tell someone.

Someone like me.

Something clicked. She trusted me. Why had she trusted me with her secret – with her entire group's secret? Lightcry's secret?

She trusted me.

I thought about that again, ignoring Amberfire's probing.

"Stormdawn! Just respond! What do you know?"

"I need some time to myself," I said. "And you kits can't deal

properly with Appledawn anyway."

Amberfire's eyes narrowed. "You're avoiding something."

"Avoiding?" I asked. "You hit a nerve, Amberfire. That's all. I'm not going to lose my temper. I never lose my temper."

"I wonder how you do that," she muttered, not sounding very friendly.

"You'll tell us one day, your secret!" Chivekit chimed.

"Maybe one day." I offered him the briefest of smiles, then turned to leave.

"Stormdawn. Wait."

I turned around. I was pretty sure I had already told Wheatpelt days ago how little I wanted to do with her anymore. She'd changed, from when she'd been that lost queen abandoned by Eagletail. She really, really didn't need me anymore. I was pretty sure she had known that for a while. Then she had lashed out, because even if I left, she didn't need me anymore.

I knew what Wheatpelt saw me as. A tool for her to be used. Nothing of importance – not the somebody I was. She'd always fed me lies, hadn't she? I'd believed, at the start, that someone truly appreciated me. But now, the Clan was warming up to me and I could see how fake Wheatpelt's current act was. I dipped my head in acknowledgement, but turned my back on her.

"I'm sorry, Wheatpelt. I have nothing – absolutely nothing – to say to you. And I never will."

I told her that, and then turned my back on her.

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON TUESDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Thirteen

I marched out of the nursery in a businesslike way. I saw Duskypelt motion to me, and to the fresh-kill pile, but it wasn't nearly time for the evening meal yet, and after Cloudysky just ... well, did that to me, I wasn't going to fall for yet another tom's trap. I was tougher than that. They couldn't shake me so easily, and I wasn't in need of love or comfort. Because I'd learnt. I couldn't trust anyone. I could make friends, definitely, but not best friends forever. Not someone I could confide my secrets in. I couldn't trust anyone with secrets, and I never could. Trust wasn't worth it. Trust was what brought pain, and what would eventually break me. I gave him the tiniest shake of my head, and watched him trudge away in disappointment.

I went to the one friend I had left. Emuwing. She was probably the only one I trusted now. I'd trusted Iceflame until 'Feathermist's descendants' came. Then she'd been cruel, following Stonestar, sure, but still cruel, and that had led to Iceleaf's death. So I couldn't trust her anymore. I couldn't trust Stonestar, either. What was up with them? Why couldn't I trust my leader and deputy? Was I really that paranoid, and couldn't trust anyone in the Clan? I probably was, although I wished I wasn't. I felt I needed to be able to trust my leader and deputy, but they weren't trustworthy. My eyes flickered in the direction of the nursery, but I turned away. It wasn't time to visit anyone, and I didn't want to see Wheatpelt. Besides, I'd just been in there a few moments ago.

Upon entering the medicine den, I noticed Frostkit and Sunkit were there. What? I'd barely left the nursery a few moments ago. Wait. Had Amberfire and the other queens left them there because of me? Because I was there, and they knew I cared about these cats? No, it couldn't be. They weren't savage that way.

But I'd seen the challenge in Amberfire's eyes, the demand.

I finally recognized those fiery green eyes of hers.

I'd seen them once before, just passing ... just passing Twolegplace. My mind meandered from what I was originally supposed to be doing. I was caught in a new mystery that I would never drop. What had they been again? Her eyes, and the ones I'd seen in Twolegplace?

They were identical. Now I remembered. The same fiery hot burn, though not amber, not quite glowing. But they had burned, really burned into mine.

Hazelshade. That was the only possible one, wasn't it? She was the only Clan cat who'd left young enough to be Amberfire's kit. So Woodfur and Amberfire – they'd had a daughter in her all along?

"Oh. Hey!" Emuwing called cheerily.

I snapped back into the present. I'd entered my friend's den, and I'd probably been gawking at her herb stocks or something for the last minute or so.

"Are you okay?" Emuwing asked, concerned. "You were ... staring at tansy."

Called it. "No, I'm fine," I insisted. "Er... how come Frostkit and Sunkit are here?" I feigned genuine curiosity even though for some reason, I couldn't care less. They weren't my responsibility. I'd had a friendship with their mother, but that was all.

"Oh, them," Emuwing meowed dismissively. "Amberfire said they were coughing, but them seem fine. I don't know how Dawnstream had Amberfire – she's so fierce, and Dawnstream was docile."

Was docile the right word? The last thing I'd seen Dawnstream do was slit her own throat. But I said none of that to Emuwing. I was pretty sure she didn't want to hear me criticize her mentor, and I wasn't about to lose what little friends I had left.

"No cough," I repeated. "They should be heading back to the nursery, then."

Emuwing shrugged. "I don't know. I got the feeling they weren't wanted. I mean, Amberfire practically dragged them here. Bit funny

to drag sick kits, don't you think? Even though they don't seem sick. She didn't even look concerned."

"Of course not," I sighed reluctantly. "The queens – they really don't care about these. Amberfire has her suspicions about Feathermist's descendants." Even more reluctantly and extremely hesitantly, I added, "So do I." It was true. I knew the truth, but I also knew Lightcry had been lying for quite some time now. It was difficult to think I cared about these cats and their outcomes. Come to think of it, why had I cared? They weren't my Clanmates. They were random cats. Not even Peaceheart's descendants.

"They aren't Feathermist's descendants," Emuwing finally said.

"What? How do you know?" I was babbling immediately. She knew! How did she know?! Had Iceleaf told her, too? Or had she overheard us? Come to think of it, that was quite possible. We weren't exactly talking softly. Mudwish had just been standing there, too!

"I know you know," Emuwing said sympathetically. "Don't hide. I heard Iceleaf that day. I also know none of them have purple eyes, and that was Peaceheart's signature. I thought Lightcry at least would have them, since she's the leader. I also know Feathermist had kits in SpringClan last time. One of her descendants was Streamlight. She took a SpringClan mate, and there are no records of any of her kits going astray. I really don't think it's possible. I had my suspicions, and Iceleaf confirmed everything."

"Oh," I whispered.

I'd had my suspicions, but Emuwing seemed to have dived deep into it. Really investigated. I knew about the purple eyes – Amberfire had just blabbed about that and I'd known that a while back too – and I knew none of them had it. But I hadn't thought to remember about Streamlight being Feathermist's granddaughter, or the fact that Feathermist hadn't mated with a rogue, she'd had a SpringClan mate. I hadn't confirmed anything with the elders' stories, really, nothing. Compared to what Emuwing knew, I'd known nothing.

"You're realizing this all now?" Emuwing asked sympathetically, her

tail curling around mine.

"Yeah," I muttered, kind of in a daze.

"It's fine," she murmured. "We can talk, any time. But stop neglecting Swanpaw."

"I'm not trying to," I grumbled. "But, well, I was in a mess with these 'CloudClan' cats. Anyway, since I don't have to care about them anymore, all my attention can go to Swanpaw."

Emuwing stared flatly at me. "'Stop caring'?" she repeated. "Stormdawn, if you stop caring, everyone will know you suspect them."

"Is that so wrong?" I shrugged innocently. It wasn't wrong! Everyone should know about their treacheries!

"I don't know." She sighed deeply. "Could I get some alone time?"

"I wouldn't mind some myself," I murmured. She patted me gently on my shoulder with her tail and retreated further back into her den to start arranging herbs again. I noticed her put marigold into the horsetail section, and I knew her mind was anywhere but focused on tidying her herb stocks.

I wasn't 'resting', though. I was headed right to Twolegplace to get the truth out of Hazelshade. I didn't know why exactly I was doing this, since I could've just asked Amberfire or Woodfur, but it would be a touchy subject, I thought. Better to question the cat who had left her mother. Hazelshade should know it all, and she'd left willingly.

The walk to Twolegplace was a long one, but it wasn't wasted. Not wasted at all. I found her almost immediately. Hazelshade was sitting gracefully on the fence of Littlecloud's home. Come to think of it, probably her home. Littlecloud had come after her, joined her Twolegs because of her.

"Hi!" she called. "You're new here. I don't think I've seen you be..." She paused, seeing a long scar that ran down my flank from one of Lovegrass's training sessions. Everyone recognized me by that.

"Fore," she finished in a whisper.

"I'm Stormdawn, and you have seen me before," I told her sharply.

"Oh, Stormdawn," she sighed. "Littlecloud has said things about you. What are you finally asking me?"

"Who are your parents?" I asked softly.

Hazelshade cocked her head. "Is this important? Like, really important?"

I shrugged.

She sighed again.

"Okay," Hazelshade finally conceded, "I'll tell you. My mother is Amberfire, and my father is ... well, his name was Birdcry."

"Birdcry?" I whispered hoarsely. I'd heard that name before. Birdcry. It sparked some memory, but I couldn't place it. He'd been an important warrior, I knew. That was all. But Birdcry? Not... "Not Woodfur?" I finally asked.

"Woodfur?" Hazelshade asked, frowning. "Are he and Amberfire together now? I don't know. Birdcry had a mad crush on her, and Amberfire loved him. Then, in the early part of her pregnancy, Birdcry died. Amberfire chickened out after that. She faked the whole thing. She often lay down, so close to the ground that no one could tell she had a swollen belly. She also got lucky – no morning sickness. She took the same amount of prey each day. It wasn't enough, but she got by. After all, she was faking it. After I was born, she took a little more prey that day to make up. I was born outside camp, next to Birdcry's grave. She wanted support. She had an easy birth – she really got very lucky. Then she left me, a newborn, next to his grave, and ate up lots of parsley. She didn't know if I'd make it without a mother, but she also knew Iceflame was nursing. So she said she'd found me, and brought me to camp. She had SeasonClan scent all over her – not to mention Amberfire's scent – which is why Amberfire knew she had to personally bring me here." Hazelshade drew in a sharp breath. "I don't know how

Woodfur and Amberfire got together. Woodfur was crushing on her, but he knew how much time she spent with Birdcry. Maybe he thought he'd died before he'd confessed his feelings to her. But they literally shared a nest. I don't know what he's done to get her to love him, but I'm sure it's fake. Amberfire never, ever loved anyone except Birdcry. Even I was second-best. She's faking with Woodfur, definitely." She rolled her eyes. "Is that hurting my mate's sister?"

I immediately knew who she was referring to. Littlecloud's sister, Emuwing. So, Emuwing had confided in Littlecloud about her crush, and Littlecloud had told Hazelshade about it? Didn't he keep secrets at all? He just revealed it to his mate like that! Poor Emuwing.

Hazelshade suddenly stopped, frowning. "I've never talked this much to anybody," she mumbled, adding an "except Littlecloud" at the back. I shrugged.

"I tend to make cats talkative," I assured her, and she laughed.

"Come back in a moon or two," she called after me. "Then you'll be able to meet my kits!"

I supposed she was expecting, but it wasn't obvious. I waved back cheerily, then dashed back to the forest. One more friend. Was that intentional of me? I'd gone to Twolegplace with no real reason at all. But now, I had Hazelshade as my friend. But I also knew that having kits changed a cat. Namely, Wheatpelt. Might it change Hazelshade too?

I ran back to the forest. Now it was time for the evening meal. I settled down with a fat mouse – just enough for me – so no one asked me to share. Strangely, Lightcry settled down beside me, dropping her pigeon next to my mouse.

"Oh, hi," she said.

Really? She'd walked all the way here, to this remote part of camp, to "oh, hi" me? That would be so inconvenient to her.

"'Oh, hi'," I repeated back.

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm hying you, and you're hying me

back?"

"What do you mean?" I asked softly. "I've always been friendly."

Lightcry nodded. "Friendlier than the rest. But I've noticed you've grown distant with us since Iceleaf's death. I understand she was your main friend. But come on, Stormdawn. There are others."

"Maybe it's because Iceleaf told me something she shouldn't have," I responded flatly.

Lightcry's eyes widened. "What?" she whispered, sounding anticipated.

"Her name is Ice," I responded flatly. "Mudwish's name is Mud. And yours is Light. Emuwing heard Forestclaw and Sunstreak. They're Forest and Sun. What are you doing, Light?"

"Lightcry!" she hissed.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Yeah!" she snapped. "Lightcry. Okay? That's my name. Ice and Mud ... well, they were recent joiners. They aren't Feathermist's descendants!"

"But, none of you are," I told her. "I know I am. You can tell from my eyes. But you? Not one of your group has Peaceheart's signature purple eyes, Lightcry. Not one."

"I'm still working it out," she mumbled. She picked up her pigeon and walked away.

Frowning back at her, I turned back to my own mouse. I'd hit a touchy subject with her. So, she knew. She knew she wasn't a descendant of Feathermist, and she'd pretended anyway. What kind of cat was she? Really. What kind of cat?

I finished my mouse in silence.

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON WEDNESDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER

Chapter Fourteen

"Hey, Stormdawn. Not everyone's eaten, and you haven't gone on a single patrol today."

I looked up.

It was Cloudysky. Again. Like always, bothering me when I was peaceful.

"Such as you?" I asked. "You mean, you haven't eaten, so I should go hunting with you? I'll do solo hunting, thank you very much."

His eyes widened with hurt, but he said nothing.

"Be hurt," I jeered. "You can be hurt all you want. In this world, you have to be"

I stopped. I could hear a rustling in the bushes, a long way away. I got up and started walking out. Cloudysky called after me. But, for all he knew, I was suddenly going solo hunting. What I knew I was doing, was hunting the enemies that had dared come near our camp.

"Come with me." I motioned to Swanpaw.

She frowned.

"You might need to go back for reinforcements. I need you," I insisted.

Swanpaw got up and followed without further ado.

The two of us trekked through the forest. Swanpaw let out the occasional yawn. It wasn't even that late yet. Still, maybe Heathermist's training was tiring. I kept my ear to the ground after a while, bending down and pressing my body against the ground. Swanpaw regarded me strangely. I would too. I could hear the pawsteps from a mile away. Well, not literally. But I could hear

them coming, two at a time, frenzied jumping and cackling of cats. I could hear their unsheathed claws scraping the forest floor. I could see them now. I looked past at least three dozen trees and bushes apiece to see their tails, but I saw them, very simply saw them. They were there, right there, coming.

"Swanpaw, go back and tell them where we are," I told her.

Her eyes hardened. "We've been in this situation before. They might not be friendly. I should be with you."

"If they're dangerous, we need reinforcements sooner. All the more, hurry!" I told her.

She nodded finally, shooting away back to camp. She was probably wondering why I'd brought her if she would be uselessly zigzagging back to camp. Well, I honestly had no idea. I should've brought a whole battle party. The Clan was going to think I was ridiculously crazy now. Smiling to myself, I sat down and waited. Waited patiently for them to arrive. Just like the situation with the CloudClan cats. It was exactly the same, I was sitting there waiting instead of walking to meet them. Lazily.

"Hey, boss. There's a cat there. Waiting and smiling like a hooligan."

"Shut up, Australia!"

"America, I'm pretty sure that lone cat heard that."

"All three of you shut up!"

I looked up expectantly, and cats began to descend from the trees and come out of the bushes.

"Oh, look," he said plainly. "Let's kill her before she goes back for reinforcements."

They surrounded me from all sides. I smiled simply at them. "I already got reinforcements," I responded quite plainly.

"Did you?" the leader's eyes narrowed.

"What's your name?" I asked, in a friendly manner.

"New Zealand," he told me. "It's Zeal for short."

"And," piped up the she-cat called Australia, "It was Aussy for short! Why, America?"

"Meric!" snapped one of the toms to the back.

"My name is Stormdawn," I told him.

New Zealand frowned. "Is that a country?" he asked, staring at his group.

"What's Storm Dawn?" America asked. "Nope. Not a country. But Zeal, I don't think she's named after a country. Her name is way, way too off. I don't know any countries starting with Storm anyway!"

"It's boss to you!" New Zealand snapped irritably, and the tom called America stuck his tongue out.

"But Zeal to me?" I asked. "How pleasant."

"Well, you're obviously the leader around here," he said.

I just laughed. "Everyone always thinks I'm leader! Why! I'm one of the Clan's most inexperienced warriors. I barely got an apprentice."

"You're a what, and you just got a what?" he asked.

"What ... what do you mean," I said flatly.

"Apprentices, you say? Oh yeah, we have those too! Their names are always cities first. They never get promoted unless their country isn't taken, or unless someone dies! Hi, Christchurch!"

Christchurch glared at him. "I can't believe I have to wish my leader to die to finally get a new name."

"Shush, you! What's wrong with the name I gave you?" one of the she-cats at the back blabbered.

"Ugh! Virginia. Come on." Christchurch muttered unhappily.

"Oh yeah. The she-cats are sometimes states," Australia added.

"What's with Australia, then?" I asked. What were states? Australia didn't seem to be one.

New Zealand sighed. "An exception."

Australia nodded, bouncing around. "It's AUSSY!"

"Alright. My whole group's names, huh? So, I'm New Zealand, that's America and his sister Australia, and that's Virginia, mate of Columbia. Christchurch, Helsinki, Paris and Nairobi are their children. Helsinki, Paris and Nairobi are coming quite close to getting their names – but Christchurch, I'll have to die first for you."

"Not. Fair," Christchurch grumbled. I almost smiled ruefully, feeling for him. So childish, though. He should be glad to be named after his leader. If he were in a Clan, it would be an honor, although most parents were more original.

"We wanted to settle down here," New Zealand said. "We can be part of your Clan thing, one of the Segments! After all, you have so much space here, and so few cats."

I sighed. "That is true. Maybe you could take the pine forest. Or the moor," I added as an afterthought. After all, no cat lived on the moor. Too ... open. Too much wind.

"Yeah!" Australia agreed happily. "To the moor, I mean!"

"Wait, there's still more of us. She's Pennsylvania – we call her Sylvia for short. Or Sylvania. Can't really remember. Most of us call her Pen, or Penny. Her mate is Romania. They have several children. In their first litter, they have Italy and Transylvania – all grown up. In their second, Ethiopia and Lithuania – also grown up. As you can see, Penny's expecting another litter."

The four kits of theirs, Italy, Transylvania, Ethiopia and Lithuania, gathered round their mother in a protective circle. Pennsylvania sighed, but she really did look very tired.

"HALT!"

I looked up. 'Halt'? To who? No one was going anywhere!

"Thank you, Stormdawn. I'll take it from here," Stonestar growled. He stepped forward, and kicked New Zealand in the chest, sending him reeling backwards. "You're too soft!" he spat angrily. "No way are you staying in our territory, or being a part of SEASONCLAN!" He scoffed indignantly, and almost kicked New Zealand again, but the leader of the newcomers' eyes sparked with ... victory.

"If you won't have us, we'll fight you!" he growled. Then his eyes fell on me. "But whoever doesn't mind us staying, well. We'll come to your camp and see who wants to join us. We won't forbid your system of apprenticing and so on. Well?"

"I assure you," Stonestar growled. "None of us are joining you." He looked so commanding then, not at all cruel. Not really the cat he'd shown us all he was in the past week.

"Maybe so," New Zealand responded. "But you were friendly, Stormdawn." He smiled cheerily at the group of SeasonClan cats. "Perhaps you'd like to join us, huh?"

"I don't want to fight," Swanpaw whimpered.

I waved my tail. "Come to me," I told her. She obliged, running to me and pressing herself against me. I could feel her relaxing.

We brought the newcomers to our camp to decide. I was pretty surprised how the vote went.

With New Zealand: Amberfire, Woodfur, Appledawn, Brownfur, and their kits, Frostkit and Sunkit (because nobody wanted them), Mudwish, myself, Swanpaw, Fallowpaw, Heathermist, Cloudysky, Stripepaw, Duskypelt (pretty sure the toms were following because of me), Shadowheart, and Sunnyheart.

Shadowheart and Firespring had split up. Many of their kits were there. Appledawn and Cloudysky from their first litter. Duskypelt and Sunnyheart from their second. Firespring was staying behind for their remaining two kits.

Everyone else was staying.

My eyes fell on Emuwing. Her gaze glittered with betrayal.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "But Stonestar and Iceflame like this ... this isn't the Clan I want to be in anymore."

"Stormdawn," she hissed. "You were my best friend. With the emphasis on were. It's not going to ever be like that again. It's not ever going to be like that again. If this is the choice you're making, we're not friends anymore. You know that, right?"

"I know," I said. "I really know. I can't say I'm happy about it. But it's the only way, isn't it?"

Emuwing nodded in acceptance, turning and stalking away. But, despite her angry front, she really was hurting on the inside. I knew she was. She was quite delicate, really, but she always wore a tough front, so no one would see how weak she truly was.

I followed New Zealand's group – who had named themselves CountryClan – to their new camp, hoping with all of my heart that I'd made the right choice.

THIS CHAPTER WAS EDITED ON WEDNESDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER

CountryClan Allegiances

Leader: New Zealand – tortoiseshell tom with amber eyes

Deputy: Stormdawn – silvery she-cat with violet eyes

apprentice, Swanpaw

Medicine cat: Iceland – white she-cat with brownish splotches and yellow eyes

apprentice, Singapore – red and white she-cat with blackish eyes

Warriors: Australia – bright orange she-cat with bright blue eyes

apprentice, Paris – orangey-red tom with dark brown eyes

America – blue-gray tom with red splotches and dark gray eyes

apprentice, Helsinki – white-and-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Virginia – pinkish-gray she-cat with bright amber eyes

Romania – reddish-brown tom with green eyes

Lithuania – yellow tom with pale blue eyes

Ethiopia – grayish-white tom with green eyes

Italy – orange, yellow and white she-cat with pale yellow eyes

apprentice, Nairobi – black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Transylvania – tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Christchurch – golden tom with green eyes

Columbia – pale peach tom, almost white, with dark gray eyes

Mudwish

Heathermist

apprentice, Fallowpaw

Cloudysky

apprentice, Stripepaw

Duskypelt

Shadowheart

Sunnyheart

Woodfur

Browntail

Queens: Pennsylvania – tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes, mate of Romania

Appledawn – mother to Browntail's kits: Dawnkit, Twilightkit and Chivekit; fostering Frostkit and Sunkit, Mudwish's kits

Amberfire – orangey-red she-cat with bright green eyes, heavily expecting Woodfur's kits

Elders: Sri Lanka – black she-cat with amber eyes

Papua New Guinea – tortoiseshell tom

(I didn't give most of the former SeasonClan cats descriptions because I already described them, like, twice, in the other two allegiances)

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Backgrounds

Amberfire

- Her first mate was called Birdcry. He is a deceased SeasonClan warrior, and the father of Hazelshade. No one ever knew Hazelshade was Amberfire's kit, and no one ever knew Dawnstream was Amberfire's mother. Amberfire's family runs through a long line of lies and fake stories. Her parents are Dawnstream and Spiketail, both deceased. Her current mate is Woodfur, whom loves her deeply, but she doesn't love him. She got harsh after Birdcry's death, and when Woodfur fell in love with her for her harshness and her tongue, she was greatly unhappy. She hasn't been able to go back to being the cat she was before Birdcry's death.

New Zealand

- He has been the leader of CountryClan for quite some time now, but he's actually very young. About Stormdawn's age, and I think most people would know what this means. New Zealand is a feisty leader and he won't be put down easily.

Stonestar and Wheatpelt

- Stonestar was corrupted by a prophecy he received some time ago about Stormdawn destroying his Clan. He secretly turned Wheatpelt on her to make her feel pained, and was shocked when it didn't affect her at all, but backfired on Wheatpelt instead. Wheatpelt had been constantly trying to talk to Stormdawn to apologize, but Stormdawn already wanted nothing to do with her. That saddened Wheatpelt greatly, and she now hates Stonestar, and is terribly depressed. She has also grown to hate Stormdawn overtime.

Iceflame

- She doesn't believe in what Stonestar is doing, but she loves him too much to care. However, Iceleaf's death shook her and she will no longer blindly follow her mate's orders. If he does something

completely bizarre, she will not follow.

Cloudysky, Duskypelt and Stormdawn

- Both toms followed Stormdawn to CountryClan due to their love for her. Their love never once wavered, but Stormdawn was never ever interested. Stormdawn set her sights on what she figured was better, never caring about her two lovers. Eventually they will depart back to SeasonClan when Stormdawn falls for someone else.

- Stormdawn was made deputy shortly after she joined CountryClan because New Zealand valued her advice and decided she would be right. He was always going to make a SeasonClan cat deputy to express confidence, and he knew Stormdawn was the right choice. She always was.

Appledawn and Browntail

- They joined CountryClan because they thought it would mean a safer world for their kits, and it would be.

Fallowpaw, Swanpaw and Stripepaw

- All followed their mentors, though with no idea why. Both she-cats are in love with Stripepaw, but he's only interested in Fallowpaw. Swanpaw will experience a crushing sense of rejection later on.

Chapter Fifteen

"Stormdawn! Stormdawn!" The former SeasonClan cats and CountryClan cats chanted my name animatedly.

I wasn't going to pretend I wasn't shocked. New Zealand had promised he'd make a SeasonClan cat deputy, but I hadn't realized he meant me. I mean, why me? There were better cats out there. Such as Heathermist, the most experienced cat who'd joined him. And yet, he'd chosen the newest warrior, minus Duskypelt, for deputy. Why me? I kept asking myself that. But really, I was happy. Truly happy. He thought I was ready, though I didn't have a clue why, but he thought I was ready to be deputy. He trusted me. For some wild, probably extremely stupid reason, New Zealand trusted me.

Why did that mean so much?

"Thank you for the honor." I dipped my head politely to New Zealand, trying to hide my wide grin.

"No problem!" he responded brightly. I almost told him a leader shouldn't respond in such an informal way, but New Zealand was so easygoing by nature it didn't seem right to tell him that. It just ... seemed his style to speak in such a nature. After all, he was a youngster. Coming from another youngster like me, technically I shouldn't be saying he was a youngster, but still.

I met in his den after that, because, apparently, Iceland and Singapore were worried about Pennsylvania. Well, not because of that, because he was wondering about mentors for them.

"I think they should get two mentors," New Zealand was saying. "One from CountryClan, one former SeasonClan cat."

I nodded. "Brownfur, Woodfur, Shadowheart, Sunnyheart and Duskypelt are available from former SeasonClan cats. The rest are training apprentices already."

"Columbia, Ethiopia, Lithuania, Romania and Virginia from my Clan," he said. How did he remember all of their weird names? Some country thing? What were countries, anyway? I was hardly interested, but it was so weird! Did all their names except Italy's, Iceland's, Singapore's and New Zealand's end with the letter 'a'? Wasn't that weird?

"Depends on how many kits Pennsylvania has," I mused, almost to myself. New Zealand laughed at me, for some reason. I mean, nothing was funny.

"Pen," he said, still half laughing at me. "Seriously, no one calls her that. So long! Who would call her Pennsylvania? Even her mate doesn't call her that!"

"Pen," I repeated. He nodded approvingly.

"Okay, fine," I muttered. I felt like they should have warrior names, but they were all about this CountryClan thing. Naming them after these so-called countries, whatever they were. It was so stupid! What about warrior names? They should have 'paw after their name, not some weird city name that completely changed!

"So, what do I do when your apprentices become warriors?" he asked.

"I can perform the ceremony," I said.

New Zealand nodded. "How about it! I'll do it for my cats, and you can do it for yours!"

I frowned suddenly. "What if a SeasonClan cat mates with a CountryClan cat?"

New Zealand frowned. "Well, they'd obviously have to decide on cities or your funny warrior names."

"They're not funny," I muttered. "Yours are funny. What is this country thing anyway?"

He frowned, again, not answering my question at all, and I found the expression funny on him. Frowning almost seemed not to suit

him, not when he was grinning like a maniac most of the time I knew him nowadays. Then, he stopped frowning at me, and he smiled.

"You're goading me," he noted.

I frowned. My turn now. Yep, I frowned. Goading him? Now that was new. I'd never goaded anyone before! Totally new. Yep. I was not goading him, not at all. Why would I be goading him anyway? What was the point?

"You can talk to me about your problems," he told me.

"Now," I said, raising my eyebrows, "Why on earth would I do that?" He was acting like we were mates or something! He was turning into Cloudysky and Duskypelt, and that was not good news at all.

"Let's just say," he explained, "As my deputy, I should know everything about you." He smiled, almost innocently.

"Then why didn't you pick someone like Virginia? Or Romania, or Transylvania? You know them. Better than me."

New Zealand could only shrug, but I found myself liking him for that attitude. Why, I wondered. I didn't contradict my own thoughts, though.

"Now," I told him, "What do I do, if my problem is a tortoiseshell tom staring right at me?"

"You tell the tom he's handsome," New Zealand meowed.

"What if I don't think he is? What if I think he's the ugliest tom I've ever met?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Stormdawn, this is definitely goading."

"Nope!" I responded brightly.

"You can go," he sighed darkly.

I nodded, even more brightly, and went to organize patrols. I sent

Heathermist, Fallowpaw, Italy and Virginia on a hunting patrol, Transylvania, Brownfur, Woodfur and Sunnyheart to patrol our "border" with SeasonClan, and Romania, Lithuania, Ethiopia, Shadowheart and Duskypelt on another hunting patrol. Then, with a bit more regret, I sent Cloudysky, Stripepaw and Swanpaw to gather moss.

"I promise," I told her. "After you're done caring for Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea, I'll take you battle training."

"You'd better!" Laughter glittered in Swanpaw's eyes, along with some accusation, but she followed Cloudysky and Stripepaw out of camp, her eyes shining as Stripepaw's tail swished back and forth. She was watching him closely, he was ignoring her. But her eyes were shining with admiration for the former rogue, almost with love glittering in their depths.

No way. Swanpaw LIKED STRIPEPAW? Like, what was so impressive about the former rogue? Nothing! And ... I thought she didn't like him, or he didn't like her. I'd seen him once or twice flirt with Fallowpaw. He wasn't interested in her. How was she to find that out? He was interested in her sister, for StarClan's sake! Were they both interested in him?

I went to the border myself, on my own. I met someone there, and he was friendly. Littlecloud. I'd gone to the Twolegplace border, yes.

"I'm here to visit," I told him. "Hazelshade said I could."

"Okay," he responded lightly.

I followed him into the Twoleg nest. He offered me some food, but I wasn't in for those stinky pellets. I went inside, and Hazelshade was curled up in her nest, sleeping peacefully.

"Hey Hazel! Guess who came!" he called brightly.

"-shade," she nodded. "And – oh, hi Stormdawn!"

"Hi," I responded, less enthusiastically.

Hazelshade cocked her head. "Is something wrong?"

"Very," I agreed sadly. "Stonestar's gone berserk, and he's crazy and everything, and now we've split up into two groups after CountryClan came."

"The what Clan?" Hazelshade asked. "What is that? Cowie, did you say?"

"Country. They're all named after supposed 'countries'. Their leader is New Zealand." I frowned, thinking to myself, then added a little more hesitantly, "Actually, I'm the deputy. I joined them when they came. I can't stand it. Stonestar made an expecting she-cat train so hard she died during her kitting because she was to exhausted. He's gone savage, and Iceflame..."

I saw the curiosity burn more when Iceflame was mentioned.

"What about her?" Hazelshade asked curiously. I remembered – Iceflame was her foster mother.

"She isn't doing anything about it," I said helplessly. "She loves him too much."

"I'll talk to her!" Hazelshade got up immediately. I saw how rounded her belly was, and wondered whether she should be making the journey. It wasn't that far, but for an expecting she-cat... Hazelshade rolled her eyes. "Don't look at me like that!" she sighed melodramatically.

"Okay, I won't," I said. "But are you sure?"

"Yeah," Littlecloud put in. "Are you sure? I know you're determined, but if you're not up to it, don't force yourself."

Hazelshade nodded determinedly, and I decided I really couldn't stop her.

"Anyway, I've been thinking a lot," said Hazelshade. "I want to rejoin SeasonClan, and I want it to be a Clan when I join. Not like this. Divided! Rogues are okay to join. But they shouldn't take over! You might have to ditch your deputyship and New Zealand's

leadership, but we could all live together! You..." She paused. "You'd only have to kill Stonestar."

"What?" I gasped. "No way is Iceflame killing her mate!" Isn't he her foster father or something? Why is she talking about killing him? I thought. I'd thought Hazelshade was a nice, gentle cat. And here she was, talking about murdering her foster father.

"She needs a deputy who'll speak up!" Hazelshade protested. "Currently, that's you! Anyway, I want my kits to have warrior names. I hear the names they have around here – Peppers, Indigo, Sharky... what madness is this? No 'paw, or, like, I saw this KIT and he said his name was BUBBLE! Like, WHY?"

I laughed. "If you're joining, you'll have to convince everyone, though."

"I will!" Hazelshade responded.

Littlecloud tagged along, since they were both leaving. I noticed neither of them had collars that kittypets wore. Maybe they'd tugged them off. I saw some mangled collars hanging from the fence, and I decided I was right.

We trekked into SeasonClan territory, and Hazelshade and Littlecloud relished the lush scents of forest. Hazelshade smiled.

"This is home," she whispered softly, almost dancing around in happiness.

"Why did you leave?" I asked.

"I interrogated Amberfire much, much later, when I was already a kittypet," Hazelshade explained. "I believed I had kittypet roots, and that my father was one, so I went there to search."

"Oh," I whispered hoarsely.

"Stormdawn," a tired voice meowed. "What are you doing? You aren't welcome here anymore. You joined the newcomers."

"The territory is still mine," I said. "I'm a SeasonClan cat at heart."

What a bother it was that the cat who'd appeared was Emuwing. She didn't know Hazelshade.

But she knew Littlecloud. Obviously. How could she not recognize her own flesh and blood?

"Brother!" Emuwing gasped, flinging herself onto him and licking his ears in a frenzied motion. Littlecloud laughed nervously, dodging her and sprinting sideways. Emuwing laughed gleefully. It was obviously an old joke between them.

"You came back," Emuwing whispered. She looked over to Hazelshade. "Is that your mate?"

"Yes," Littlecloud nodded proudly.

"She's expecting," said Emuwing. "Why is she here?"

"We want to unite SeasonClan and rejoin it!" Hazelshade meowed enthusiastically.

"Is that even possible?" Emuwing asked warily. "Stonestar is insane, Iceflame is madly following his orders, and you, Stormdawn – the only cat who ever talked sense into anyone in the Clan, the only one who ever spoke up – you left!"

"Well," I said, "I figured if SeasonClan wanted to be ruled by a mad leader, I wasn't going to be with them."

Emuwing sighed. "So practical. Yet..."

I grinned sheepishly at her. Somehow, this time, she didn't look angry. Just wary and tired, and not entirely sure what to do with us.

"Stonestar is addicted to catmint," she finally said. "He keeps eating it, and I have no idea what it's doing to him."

"Corrupting him, maybe?" Hazelshade asked. "In Twolegplace the kittypets – or housecats – they call it catnip, and it does that."

Emuwing's eyes widened. "Really?"

Hazelshade nodded.

Finally, my ex-best friend consented to bring us back to SeasonClan's camp. Hazelshade gawked at the change in the forest, all these diagonal 'X' markings on the trees. I frowned at them, trying to remember if they'd been there when I'd left a week before. No, wait, they hadn't been here at all! What?!

"ARE THOSE FORMER SEASONCLAN EXILES I SEE?" Stonestar bellowed. "ICEFLAME! ORGANIZE A PATROL AND KICK THEM OFF THE TERRITORY!"

Iceflame gawked. Not at me, not at Littlecloud, but at Hazelshade.

"My daughter!" she cried, running up to Hazelshade. The two touched noses, and Iceflame covered Hazelshade's fur with loving licks. It was like Iceflame was truly her mother, not just her foster mother. Iceflame's true kits watched from the side, looking on at them jealously.

"I want to stay," Hazelshade said. "I made a mistake, moons ago. But I want to stay in a united SeasonClan, mother." She looked up at Iceflame with shining eyes. Eyes full of admiration that Iceflame knew she didn't deserve, that she was ashamed to receive.

"You ... you know already," Iceflame whispered. "You know I'm not your mother." There was a depth in her tone, sadness.

"Not biologically," Hazelshade agreed. "But Amberfire was an awful mother anyways. You are my mother."

Iceflame whispered words to Hazelshade and pressed herself against her. I watched the exchange with amusement. Iceflame showing affection wasn't entirely new to me, but this much – I'd only ever seen her do it once, and only once, when Joyspirit had been severely wounded.

I saw her there, at the edge of the crowd. Joyspirit, looking on with jealousy beside Coriandermist. Stargleam and Flametail just sighed. I wondered what they were sighing at, then I looked around and saw Wheatpelt behind me. I groaned. I'd forgotten Stargleam and

Flametail were Wheatpelt's parents!

"You're back," Iceflame whispered. "I'd unite SeasonClan, I'd do anything for you."

"WHAT?" bellowed Stonestar.

"You..." Iceflame whipped around. "Will you SHUT IT! Our daughter has returned, and all you do is YELL? She wants SeasonClan united! DO IT! Why did you make everyone like this in the first place? Rogues or not rogues! We are SEASONCLAN! How did this happen?!! Are you corrupted, Stonestar? Do as she wants!"

Hazelshade, I'd admit, seemed to have made her bold. Iceflame stood up to her full height and looked Stonestar in the eye. "EXPLAIN!" she bellowed furiously, unsheathing her claws and scratching the earth in her fury.

Then, out of nowhere, completely unexpectedly, Lightcry ran over. She leapt – not at Stonestar, not at Iceflame – but at me, and slitted my throat.

~

"Stormdawn."

"Stormdawn, wake up."

"Stormdawn, hurry up and wake up."

I groaned, shifting uncomfortably. "I'm dead," I said, without opening my eyes. "This is StarClan." I opened my eyes, and I saw the lush green forests that must be StarClan's hunting grounds. It was beautiful. Was it this nice to die?

"I know it's StarClan, my daughter. Wake up."

I woke up. 'My daughter'? This must be Root!

"Root?" I whispered.

"Yes, it's me," Root agreed, licking me lovingly. "I'm Root. Your

father. Peacewind... what happened to her? I thought it was an honor to raise kits with her, and then... then she became what she is now."

"If she was different before," I told him boldly, "I didn't know her then. She's been boring as long as I know her. The absent mother who never cared."

"She cares," Root whispered sadly.

"She has an odd way of showing it," I meowed, sticking out my tongue. I didn't know why I was being so disrespectful to my father, but he just smiled like it was some kind of joke.

"Well," he meowed, "You should be going back. And maybe you should choose one of those three toms."

"Three?" I asked him, cocking my head curiously.

"He literally asked you about your problems," Root answered breezily. "Did you forget?"

"I didn't," I murmured. "Goodbye, father."

"Goodbye."

New Zealand, I'm coming for you.

Chapter Sixteen

I awoke in the medicine den. I squinted slightly, and saw I was alone with Emuwing. This was going to be awkward.

"It's impossible." Emuwing was talking to the wall. "How did her throat just heal like that?" I stared through my eyelids, and she was peering curiously at my throat where Lightcry had violently slashed me earlier.

"StarClan," I said matter-of-factly.

Emuwing whipped around to stare at me. "You're awake!"

"I'm surprised all the moony toms are gone," I muttered under my breath.

Emuwing gave a nervous half-laugh. "A lot of things have happened, Stormdawn. Hazelshade goaded Iceflame, and she killed Stonestar. She's Icestar now. She's already back from the Moonstone. I went with her, and Cocoaleaf stayed here. For one, even though they're not Feathermist's descendants, they could stay."

"Okay," I agreed. "They could. And so could CountryClan."

"You love him, don't you?" she asked. "You love New Zealand."

"What are you talking about, I barely know him," I muttered. But when she mentioned him, when she even said his name, my heart was beating wildly.

"But you want to know him," she said. Her voice was almost pitying.

Finally, I let myself nod.

Emuwing gave a delicate laugh.

"Is he outside?" I asked.

Emuwing rolled her eyes. "Stormdawn, all your lovers are outside."

"Let him in," I said.

"Only him?"

"That'll send a message to Duskypelt and Cloudysky."

Emuwing sighed, nodding, and walked out. She almost looked resigned to what I'd asked her to do. Was it because I had the toms, and she was forced to be alone for the rest of her life? Never raise kits with any tom, just deliver kits, over and over again, and watch the happy faces, never to experience it herself?

I heard a 'WHAT?' from Cloudysky, a sigh of resignation from Duskypelt, and a soft patter of paws as Emuwing and New Zealand entered.

"You let me in," New Zealand said, half-dazed. He looked hopeful.

"I did," I nodded. "I don't know you very well."

"Neither do I know you."

"But I want to know you."

New Zealand smiled. It reached his eyes.

"Get better soon," he meowed briefly. "I need a sense of purpose now. Did you know? My entire CountryClan is in shatters. We're completely joining SeasonClan, somehow, and we're not having country names anymore. Completely changing to warrior names. Lithuania is never going to adapt. She loves her name."

"On the contrary," Cloudysky meowed from outside – eavesdropping, ugh – "Lithuania told me that she didn't mind as long as she got a pretty name. And, apparently, Icestar is promising her the name Lightdawn. She likes that."

"Oh, whatever." New Zealand rolled his eyes.

I followed him outside. Apparently, I was strong enough to do that.

"Zeal," I said finally. "Do you know what happened to those CloudClan cats?"

New Zealand shrugged. "Well, Lightcry, Earthmist and Sunstreak were executed. The rest are staying."

Whoa! Lightcry, Earthmist and Sunstreak were executed? That was a bit harsh to Earthmist and Sunstreak! They hadn't done anything at all. Lightcry had been the true mastermind, but her siblings were being punished.

I nodded stiffly at the news, resigned.

Icestar was on the High Rock, and she regarded me with a motherly smile.

"Stormdawn! You're okay!" Swanpaw bounced over.

"I'm okay."

She pressed against me as if I were her mother. I didn't quite get it – her mother was Lightmist.

"New Zealand, Iceland, Singapore, Virginia, Lithuania, Ethiopia, Romania, Pennsylvania, Italy, Transylvania, Nairobi, Helsinki, Christchurch, Paris, Columbia, Australia and America, step forward."

Columbia supported Pennsylvania, and the two of them came up to the High Rock. Their kits, Italy, Transylvania, Lithuania and Ethiopia followed behind. Further back were Romania and Virginia, walking together – ugh – romantically, and their kits, Nairobi, Helsinki, Christchurch and Paris. Lastly were America and Australia, who were Iceland's children with a deceased cat. (Yep. Iceland totally had kits.)

"New Zealand, from this moment onwards you will be known as Zealheart. Columbia, from this moment onwards you will be known as Conefoot. Pennsylvania, from this moment onwards you will be known as Pansyleaf. Italy, from this moment onwards you will be known as Irisstream. Transylvania, from this moment onwards you will be known as Tansyclaw. Lithuania, from this moment onwards

you will be known as Lightdawn. Ethiopia, you will be known as Earthwing. Romania, Virginia, you will be Rowanbark and Vixenleap. America, Australia, you will be known as Ashwind and Airstreak. Nairobi, Helsinki, Christchurch and Paris, you will be known as Nettlepaw, Heartpaw, Cypruspaw and Pheasantpaw, and your mentors will be Conefoot, Irisstream, Tansyclaw and Lightdawn. Iceland, you will be apprenticed to Cocoaleaf and Emuwing, and your name will be Iceflight. Singapore, your name will be Songpaw, and you will also be apprenticed to Cocoaleaf and Emuwing."

Everyone cheered for them – Conefoot, Pansyleaf, Irisstream, Tansyclaw, Lightdawn, Earthwing, Rowanbark, Vixenleap, Ashwind, Airstreak, Iceflight, Songpaw, Nettlepaw, Heartpaw, Cypruspaw and Pheasantpaw. They would be a good addition to the Clan – a lot more warriors, five more apprentices, and one new queen to bear some more kits. More than that, now that CountryClan had merged, all the families were together again. That was a happy thing indeed.

"I have to name my deputy now," Icestar meowed quietly. There was a quiet, simple, yet confident air to our new leader. I had to say, I liked it.

I was surprised she wasn't making a big thing out of it, meowing as quietly as she had. Was it because she didn't know who to pick for deputy? I could suggest some people – Heathermist was certainly experienced enough. Or maybe, someone even older, like Echoheart.

"Stormdawn, will you be my deputy?" Icestar asked.

I stared, then looked at my paws. "Um – me?" Great StarClan, I suddenly felt so shy, and every cat's eyes were on me. Why did I find this embarrassing?

Icestar nodded. "There is no one better I want to lead the Clan with me now. I need your rebelliousness. You're rebellious, but for a good reason, and you don't go along with everything said. You'll rebel when I make loony decisions. I need you."

I saw the desperation in Icestar's eyes, despite her big play of confidence.

"I'll do it," I agreed.

"Stormdawn! Stormdawn!"

I dipped my head in acceptance.

I hopped off the stump where I'd been standing and went back to the medicine den for some touch-up of my treatment.

"Stormdawn..." Emuwing whispered. "Congratulations. Also ... what I said on the day you left ... I didn't mean it!"

I looked up at her and purred. "You're forgiven, Emuwing."

Emuwing beamed. "Great! Now we can be besties again!" She looked so bright, so happy, I didn't dare say no. I would not let those words she said, that we could never be friends again, infect me.

Instead, I laughed delightedly. I had missed Emuwing in my week at CountryClan, although, let's say, New Zealand – wait, no, Zealheart – had been a decent substitute. Although, obviously, he was a tom, and not the same as my best, well, she-cat friend.

"Alright, you're discharged, my patient!" Emuwing said in a over-dramatic way. "But come back if you feel so much as an itch! Or you can come chat whenever you like," she added as an afterthought.

I rolled my eyes in mock concern, but really, I was going to turn up at the medicine den every now and then, even if it was for nothing more than to talk with Emuwing.

"I wanted to ask you something," I said carefully. "How come you suddenly warmed up to me? You know, when Minnowpelt and Littlecloud were around, you completely ignored me. Does this have something to do with them?"

Emuwing paused. Then she sighed wryly. "Well, kind of. Let's say

Minnowpelt absolutely hated you. She told me to stay away. Did you even notice Littlecloud was in love with you? He was so shy to tell you, he ended up accidentally ignoring you all the time, because every time you were around, he shied away, not sure of what to say. He did spend time with you, only briefly, maybe, during training, during which he admired you. I'm not sure if he still loves you. Maybe he does. But he's with Hazelshade now, isn't he?"

"Hazelshade," I mumbled. "Oh, right. She's my friend." Littlecloud loved me? Well, those feelings were obviously gone. Maybe if he hadn't ignored me so much, I might've loved him too.

Emuwing stiffened. "Then – who's her mother?"

"Icestar fostered her," I said, "because Amberfire faked everything."

"But why? She and Woodfur are obviously mates." There was just a slight twinge of sadness as Emuwing described Amberfire as the mate of her beloved. Still, I'd never thought Woodfur was right for Emuwing anyway. He was too ancient and boring. Like, so, so old, even though he was going to father his first litter of kits.

"Not that," I told her. "Hazelshade is Amberfire's daughter with Birdcry. She thinks Amberfire's cheating on Woodfur, too."

Emuwing's gaze hardened. "Well, if that's so."

I frowned at her. I could see red-hot anger blazing in Emuwing's eyes. Didn't know where it'd come from.

"You can go now, Stormdawn," Emuwing meowed softly. "I need some time to myself. I'm sorry." Probably thinking about Woodfur, and how she loved him.

"It's fine, I completely understand," I whispered back, and stepped out of her den to feel the soft grassy ground of camp. I smiled wistfully. I'd always wanted to be here, and suddenly, I was here, and I was deputy. I was stepping on this ground, leaving footprints as a deputy. But still, I need to organize patrols. Something that wasn't ever going to be fun. I sighed.

"On the Twolegplace border," I called. "Heathermist, you'll lead a patrol and Fallowpaw can follow. You'll take Flametail, Lightdawn, Pheasantpaw, Airstreak, and Silkpelt. To our border with the river cats, Ashdust, you'll take Stargleam, Sunbright, Ashwind, Conefoot, Nettlepaw, and Spidertail." I hadn't forgotten that Sunbright and Spidertail always went on patrols together. "I want two hunting patrols. The first will be led by Zealheart, to be assistant-led by Coriandermist. Lightmist, Hollowmist, Irisstream, Heartpaw, Tansyclaw and Cypruspaw, you'll go on this patrol. On the second, I will lead it and I'll bring Swanpaw, along with Sunnyheart, Firespring, Ashenface, Rowanbark and Vixenleap." I smiled to myself. I'd made each patrol half-half with CountryClan cats as well as our own, and that quite satisfied me. "Cloudysky, Duskypelt, I want you, as well as Graymist, Echoheart, Riversong, Streamwhisker, Leafshine, Woodfur, Browntail and Frogleap to make all the dens bigger, especially the warriors'. It will be pretty cramped, so please work quickly. Any remaining warriors will either help out or train their apprentices."

With that, I motioned with my tail for my hunting patrol to join me. Sunnyheart, Firespring, Ashenface, Rowanbark, Vixenleap and Swanpaw trailed behind me, Swanpaw almost at my side. She was sad about something, I noticed. Her tail was drooping, and she wasn't the bright Swanpaw I knew. Ashenface, who probably had motherly instincts since she was mother to Oakpaw, Darkpaw and Lilypaw, watched her, frowning, and shot me a look. What was I supposed to do, patch up whatever was going wrong with Swanpaw?

"Okay, let's split up here into mini-patrols. I'll take Swanpaw to the Great Redwood to hunt, Firespring and Sunnyheart, you'll go to the Great Sycamore, and lastly, Ashenface, Vixenleap and Rowanbark, you'll go to the Great Banyan."

They all nodded, Ashenface the least happy, probably because she was with Vixenleap and Rowanbark. I brought Swanpaw to the Great Redwood and we did quite a bit of hunting, but Swanpaw was missing her usual spring in her step. Her tail was drooping, which was actually pretty good for hunting, but I knew she was depressed. Eventually, it drooped so much that it snagged on a twig next to our

fresh-kill pile. What was going on with her, especially with her tail?

"Ow!" she gasped out loud in pain.

I rushed over and delicately removed her tail from the twigs, gently.

"Thanks," she mumbled. Dejectedly, she looked at our food pile and forced a bright smile onto her face. "Wow, that's great!" she meowed with gusto. "Look – I know the elders love sparrows, and we have so much of it!"

"Well, we hunted mainly birds today," I commented. "What's on your mind, Swanpaw? You've been depressed."

Swanpaw sighed, and all faked enthusiasm left her. "Well ... I mean, Stripepaw ... he ...."

I frowned at her. "Stripepaw what?"

Oh. Wait. Swanpaw liked Stripepaw. That must mean he'd rejected her.

"He ... he chose Fallowpaw," Swanpaw finished in a whisper. I was right! Wait, I shouldn't be so triumphant at that. So what if I was right?

"Oh. It's okay, Swanpaw. There are other toms out there, okay." I tried my best to force some motherly comforting into my voice.

"And ... and Lightmist is never there for us!" Swanpaw wailed. "I haven't seen her or Hollowmist much since I was a kit! Me and Fallowpaw left, and she didn't even follow. It's like she doesn't care!"

"She does, Swanpaw," I meowed quietly. "She's your mother. She must care."

"Sometimes... sometimes it feels like you're my mother," Swanpaw blurted. "You care so much for me, and for every cat out there. You look after everyone. You're basically my mother." Then she sighed. "I'm sorry for blurting out all my problems..."

"It's okay," I murmured, pressing myself reassuringly against her. "Everything's okay. If she won't be your mother, I will. I promise."

Then I froze.

I'd made this same promise to someone before, only tweaked a bit, and I'd broken it. I'd fallen out with Wheatpelt, and I hadn't raised her kits with her. But Swanpaw was different. Really different.

Swanpaw pressed herself back against me, and she relaxed slowly. Her eyes even closed. She trusted me.

"Let's go, Swanpaw," I meowed softly. "We're to meet the others at the Great Banyan."

Swanpaw nodded, a little happier, and she grabbed about half the prey and followed me to the Great Banyan.

"Oh, wow! That's a lot!"

We'd even caught more than Ashenface, Vixenleap and Rowanbark. I frowned about that. They had three people! But I didn't press it. As we headed back, Ashenface motioned with her tail to talk to me in private. I wondered what that would be about, but I fell behind. Swanpaw looked around worriedly.

"Give me a moment, Swanpaw!" I called. "Don't worry, I'll take you battle training later."

Swanpaw grinned, then turned back to the front.

"Ashenface?" I asked expectantly.

"Why did you saddle me with them?" Ashenface hissed.

"What's wrong with them?" I asked, alarmed.

"Vixenleap and Rowanbark. They're awful hunters!" Ashenface drew in a sharp breath. "Out of all you saw in our prey pile, Rowanbark only caught a mouse and Vixenleap caught nothing. I caught everything else." She sounded so spiteful when she said that, I almost recoiled.

Wow. That was pretty impressive for one cat, though. Catching all that prey by herself, in not that much time?

"Er ... good job?" I asked awkwardly. "That's pretty, uh, amazing."

Ashenface glared at me. "Not about my catches! Seriously! About their poor catches! They need to be assigned mentors!" Ashenface sighed. "Out of all of them, I think only Zealheart hunts decently. I've seen him. That's why you assigned him as the leader of a patrol, right?"

"No," I said. "It was just to signal that SeasonClan and CountryClan are one. Also, I thought since he's their leader he'd be the most capable."

"Well, he is," Ashenface nodded.

"Wait, mentors for them?" I was frowning now.

"You're deputy!" Ashenface sighed exasperatedly. "You can do this sort of thing!"

I already disliked Ashenface, I'd never really talked to her before but she was awful. "Right," I mumbled. Trying to change the topic, I added, "How're you and Frogleap? I haven't seen you together lately." The moment I said that and digested the meaning of my words, my eyes widened. Ashenface's eyes widened too, and she was staring back, her eyes glazed with shock. It was evidently shock she'd already experienced.

"We broke up," she said quietly. "Please don't tell Darkpaw, Oakpaw or Lilypaw. They don't need to know their mother and father aren't together anymore."

"But .... Why?" I found myself asking.

I didn't know Ashenface or Frogleap very well, but I knew they'd been deeply in love, mainly from Ashenface's best friend, Coriandermist, who blabbed a lot. But ... broke up? They even had kits!

"He found another she-cat. One he liked better," Ashenface

explained with a long sigh. "Please don't ask anymore. It's touchy."

I nodded, slightly embarrassed. I'd pushed her on a touchy subject. "Sorry," I told her softly. "Let's head back."

Ashenface nodded, her mind evidently elsewhere. "I don't even have friends anymore," she said, although she had just told me to drop the subject.

"What ... what about Coriandermist," I muttered. Those two were like, crazy about each other.

"Don't tell me about her!" Ashenface's eyes blazed, and she looked terrifying for a moment. "Don't you dare tell me about her! That stupid traitor!"

Ashenface stormed away from me, barging past Vixenleap and Rowanbark. Swanpaw watched her go with a stricken expression, and slowly crept away from her conversation with Sunnyheart, sliding to the back with me.

"What's up with her?" she asked in a cross whisper.

"Broke up with Frogleap, and I think he's her best friend Coriandermist's mate now. I accidentally pushed the topic," I replied straightforwardly.

Swanpaw had this look of terror in her eyes.

"Swanpaw," I meowed gently, "you need to be braver."

"I know," she whimpered. "I know, Stormdawn, but I can't."

"I can't always be here for you," I continued, in the same gentle, compelling voice.

Swanpaw looked petrified. "I ... I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here...."

"I'm not your world, Swanpaw," I meowed quietly. "Don't make me become that world. You have to live your own life, without other cats interfering and shaping it. You shape your own life, Swanpaw.

Live it the way you want to live it. Terror, always depending on other cats – Swanpaw, is this how you want to live?"

Slowly, but firmly, Swanpaw nodded her head. It seemed firm, but was slightly shaky. I sighed. She hadn't truly decided, then.

"It's fine," I told her. "I'll be here for as long as you need me to be."

Swanpaw visibly relaxed as I said that, but she stayed unusually close to me for the rest of the journey back to camp. I frowned at that. Was she scared? I really hoped she wasn't scared. Swanpaw was something like a coward already, she didn't have the courage for anything!

I saw them together. Two pairs of cats who had broken up and had new almost-mates. Frogleap and Coriandermist, with Ashenface watching them with a horrified expression. Coriandermist turned to Ashenface, and she was smirking. Not something I'd expect from Ashenface's best friend. Then she turned to Frogleap, and they went on a stroll together, a moonlit stroll. Ashenface's brown face was turning slightly reddish.

Next to that were Stripepaw and Fallowpaw. Not officially mates because they were still apprentices, but almost-mates in any case.

But, to my horror, I saw yet another one of those rogues in the camp. Despite everything I'd defended them about, the CloudClan cats had taught me a lesson. And though I was trying to love Zealheart, that didn't change my dislike of rogue cats.

But when I came in, she transfixed me of all people with her glowing ...

Purple gaze.

She was related to me. She had those purple eyes, those deep violet. Identical to mine.

Identical to Peacewind's.

Violet-eyed cats were weird. The other cats who had purple eyes were always indigo. But really, I'd always wondered why I'd been in

a one-kit litter. They weren't exactly uncommon, but Peacewind had apparently been pretty big. I'd been a big kit, but not big enough.

Meaning I must've had a littermate.

"Are you my sister?" she asked in a soft voice. "Are you Stormdawn?"

"I am," I meowed hoarsely. "Are you..."

"I'm your sister," she meowed softly. She looked nearly identical to me, but my silver fur was replaced by bright golden. We were like silver and gold, with the same eyes.

"My name is Glitter," she meowed quietly.

Glitter. It fitted her, at least.

"You should me with me," she meowed. "We're siblings, Stormdawn. And ... and Peacewind. We're family."

"I'm not family with her," I meowed stoutly.

Glitter immediately looked confused. "Then we're not siblings."

"She's my mother," I conceded. "But I didn't want her to be."

Glitter's eyes widened. "But ... why?"

"She was gone during my childhood," I told her.

"I apologized!" Peacewind burst out indignantly from somewhere behind us.

"Also, she eavesdrops," I said, louder than ever. I heard an annoyed huff from the warriors' den, and then I saw violet eyes peek out.

Glitter sighed. "If you're not joining me as a rogue..."

"I'm deputy, Glitter," I responded.

"But," said Glitter. "I have a mate here. He thinks me dead. That's the only reason I came here."

"Then join," I said.

Glitter nodded, and then a tortoiseshell tom with amber eyes stepped out from the shadows.

"Glitter?" Zealheart asked, and he looked like he was staring at a dream.

Chapter Seventeen

Glitter? The word from his mouth replayed over and over again in my head. The cat who loved Glitter, the cat whom she loved – it was Zealheart, the cat whom I loved. She loved him, and that dreamy look he gave her - he loved her too, and he loved her more than me.

Finally. I finally loved a cat enough to say I'd get to know him, and then whoosh, his childhood love turns up and she's not dead. Woo-hoo. How nice. Way to go, Glitter. Thank you so much. What a great sister she was.

"I'll leave you to it," I said bitterly. "Zealheart, you could at least have told me you had a dead love and would ditch me the moment she turned up."

"Wait, what?" asked Glitter. "You're with her?"

"Kind of," Zealheart said with a grimace. Yep, he grimaced. He was ashamed to be with me. I hated those kinds of toms. I hadn't seen many, but like Frogleap's abandonment of Ashenface, I could feel the pain and rejection in me now. It felt built-up, from all the rejections over the years of my life. Minnowpelt. Wheatpelt. And so many others ...

"I'll leave you to it," I practically spat out. "Thank you so much for playing with my heart, Zealheart. That was so helpful." Then I stalked off.

I saw an almost familiar white and gray shape following me.

"What do you want, Cloudysky?" I sighed. "I have nothing to say to you."

He stopped beside me, and opened his mouth to speak.

"I don't know what you have to say," I told him, turning away. "But

I don't want to hear it. I've decided, and I knew this long ago from Peacewind's treatment. Love isn't worth it. It hurts more than the sharpest claw. I didn't love him that much yet. Maybe it's better. Maybe it's better I'm not like Ashenface and Frogleap." They had been happy, for a time. Was it wrong of me to say I didn't want to be like them? Ashenface was depressed now. She'd born his kits, and he'd still left her. Did that even matter? Cloudysky and Duskypelt had been trailing me for so long now, never giving up. But one day, they would.

"I'm going to organize patrols." I turned away and called to the rest. "Right. Duskypelt, have you finished patching the camp?"

"Patching or expanding?" He asked, amused. "Yes, if you mean expanding." He had a she-cat at his side. Plumwhisker.

Wait, WHAT? From me, he went to PLUMWHISKER? There was no one worse than that cat! Okay, maybe Sunstreak had been worse. Or maybe Zealheart.

"Right, if you aren't too tired, Duskypelt, can you lead the evening patrol."

"Okay, who should I take?"

"Ummmm... Frogleap, Ashenface, Flametail and Stargleam."

Duskypelt raised his eyebrows.

"What?" I asked.

"You're sending me on a patrol with two mates, and two divorces?"

"Urm..." I muttered.

He sighed. "Fine. But can I take Plumwhisker instead of Frogleap?"

"Fine," I muttered. I didn't know why I'd put Frogleap and Ashenface together. Maybe I'd done it instinctively. I always put mates together on the same patrol. Like, well, Flametail and Stargleam.

Anyway, this way left Coriandermist and Frogleap to their moonlit stroll. Feh. Like anyone cared about love anymore!

For some reason, Icestar called me to her den.

I entered, frowning.

"Ashenface brought to me a matter," Icestar said. "She said the CountryClan cats need mentors."

"Oh, that," I sighed. "I don't think it's true. I mean, they need to get used to the hunting. Maybe assign them a cat or two to help, but they don't need individual mentors."

"Okay," Icestar agreed. "Anyway... is Swanpaw and her siblings ready to become warriors? And Stripepaw?"

"Yes, not sure about Duckpaw though."

"Stormdawn, are you doubting your mother?"

"Maybe?" I offered her a small grin. Icestar sighed.

She went outside. "All cats gather below the High Rock! Clan meeting!"

"It's one sentence," I meowed pointedly, but Icestar ignored me.

"Apparently the CountryClan cats need hunting practice," Icestar said, looking at Zealheart. I saw him, and Glitter was by his side. "I'm assigning Coriandermist and Ashenface to help train the CountryClan she-cats" – I saw Ashenface groan and Coriandermist look awfully embarrassed – "and Frogleap and Ashdust to train the toms." Frogleap and Ashdust nodded happily – they were littermates, after all. "Also, Glitter, step forward." Glitter flicked her tail in farewell to Zealheart and he glanced absent-mindedly at me before realizing my eyes were narrowed. He quickly looked away.

"Glitter, I know you're a full-grown cat and your sister is deputy," Icestar meowed apologetically, "But I'm still going to assign you a mentor." I almost sniggered, but Icestar was looking at me. "Glitterpaw, your mentor will be Silkpelt. Silkpelt, you received

excellent training from Flyflight, who is unfortunately ... a kittypet now," Icestar mumbled, slightly unorganized in her speech. "and you will pass down those qualities to Glitterpaw. Also, Swanpaw, Duckpaw, Fallowpaw and Stripepaw, step forward.

"I, Icestar, leader of SeasonClan, call the spirits of StarClan to look upon these apprentices. Swanpaw, Duckpaw, Fallowpaw, Stripepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," they all meowed in unison.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names. Swanpaw, from this moment onwards you will be known as Swanflutter. Duckpaw, you will be known as Duckstep. Fallowpaw, you will be known as Fallowmist. Stripepaw, you will be known as Stripetail."

"Swanflutter! Duckstep! Fallowmist! Stripetail! Swanflutter! Duckstep! Fallowmist! Stripetail!"

The Clan cheered happily for its new warriors. I called Swanflutter's name the loudest, naturally. Fallowmist and Stripetail twined tails as they accepted praise. Ugh. Obviously mates, and Stripetail couldn't have less obviously broken Swanflutter's heart. She had been smiling, enjoying herself, then those two had twined tails and her smile had slid right off her face. It had turned into a frown, my least favorite emotion for her.

Lightmist and Hollowmist watched from the side, and they just smiled. No congratulations for this kits.

Swanflutter saw this. She nodded pointedly to me.

"Congratulations! I like your name," I told her.

"See them?" she asked. "Doing nothing. We're warriors now. They should be proud."

"Probably thinking of their new kits."

"What?" asked Swanflutter. Then she saw it. Lightmist's belly,

slightly rounded at the sides and bigger than usual. "Oh," She muttered, in annoyance.

"It's fine," I told her.

"It's not," Swanflutter muttered unhappily. "See you in the morning." She walked away, pointedly ignoring Fallowmist and Stripetail. She didn't talk to Duckstep either – he was a complete idiot.

I sighed. What now.

I heard yelling from outside camp, and the evening patrol was coming back. Duskypelt's tail was twined with Plumwhisker's. Oh, well. He moved on. Why was I not disappointed? Following behind them, Flametail and Stargleam, also twining tails. Ashenface hadn't re-entered, and I heard her voice as well as Frogleap's outside camp.

I heard a soft cry from Coriandermist as well. What was going on?

I walked out silently, hiding myself among the bushes.

"Why?" Ashenface was hissing. "Why would you leave me, Frogleap? Do you even care about Lilypaw, Darkpaw and Oakpaw at all? Can't you see? They don't understand! Their father with another she-cat! It's cheating on me! And why. After a week or two. Coriandermist is already expecting kits?! How long have you been mated with me, but been with her?!"

"Not long!" Frogleap meowedimmediately. "I was only slightly attracted to Coriandermist, then I started talking to her a moon before we broke up. That's all, I swear!"

Coriandermist moved back. troubled.

"It's not worth it," Ashenface hissed. "Your love for her. It's not going to work." Then she turned back to Coriandermist, and pure hatred filled her eyes. "And you. You were my best friend. Not good enough, you have to steal my mate too?" Her eyes flashed dangerously, a challenge glittering in its hatred-filled depths. "Not good enough for you," Ashenface repeated. Every word was spat out, like Coriandermist was nothing better than dirt.

"I swear, I never thought you would be this angry!" Coriandermist spluttered. I wanted to roll my eyes at her. She was stealing her best friend's mate, and expected her not to be angry?

"It's still okay to take him?" Ashenface breathed.

Coriandermist looked terrified.

"Stop!" Frogleap shouted. "Stop now, Ashenface. She's an expecting queen!"

"Oh, how nice," Ashenface growled. "That doesn't change anything!" She unsheathed her claws, and swiped at Coriandermist, nicking her ear. I wondered what was going on, whether this was actually going to be a fight. Hissing, Coriandermist lunged, her claws unsheathed too, and Frogleap joined.

Ashenface was better than the both of them combined.

She dodged Frogleap's attacks but was more insistent on attacking Coriandermist. Finally, I lunged in, taking the side of Frogleap and Coriandermist.

"Why?" Ashenface whispered, and she swiped at me, ducked Frogleap's attack and kicked Coriandermist in the stomach. "Why you too, Stormdawn? Why did you take their side? Am I not allowed my vengeance?"

Coriandermist was gasping and trying to escape the attack, but wherever she paused to catch her breath, Ashenface lunged there next. She was tiring, actually, we were all tiring, but somehow, Ashenface the least. It was a wonder, because she was fighting all three of us. She was better than Goldenwind and Appledawn! Why was she not renowned for fighting?

Ashenface apparently had huge stamina reserves. She dug her claws into my shoulders, and I felt a piercing pain before raking my claws across her right leg. Ashenface let out a screech, then disengaged from me, leaping atop Coriandermist while I recovered from her attack on my shoulders. She slashed at Coriandermist's flank and she drew blood. A lot of blood.

Frogleap let out a piercing battle cry and he jumped onto Ashenface back. She twisted and bit his shoulder, ripping out a huge chunk of his fur. With it came more blood. I joined him in fighting her, hissing as my shoulders burned, but still, Ashenface avoided all our attacks or blocked us, and the battle was getting hopeless.

"Stop!" came a yell.

It was Ashdust. I didn't know how this had an effect on Ashenface, but she faltered for a moment. But that falter was gone before we could even make use of it, and she slid under us easily and slashed at Coriandermist's other flank. The she-cat yowled in pain and collapsed to the ground in a mess of blood. I heard Silkpelt crying out for Emuwing, Cocoaleaf, Iceflight or Songpaw.

Emuwing was the first out and Songpaw was trailing behind her.

"Stop!" Songpaw cried, sounding scared.

"Stop what?" growled Ashenface, as she swiped at Frogleap's face again.

Ashdust jumped in. "Stop it, Ashenface!" he growled. "You were never like this before! I named you after me, and how did that get me? Sycamorekit would hate you for this!"

Ashenface's eyes widened, then she laughed, a miserable, evil laugh. "Father, Sycamorekit died a long time ago!" She launched herself at her own father, slashing her claws across his throat. Emuwing let out a cry, something like "That was fatal!"

Then I tackled Ashenface and pinned her to the ground. Frogleap clutched his face nearby, but Ashenface kicked me in the stomach and practically flipped me over while I was winded. She walked up to me dangerously.

"I don't want to kill you, Stormdawn!" she growled. "I never did! But if you resist me, this is what life is like!" Ashenface had me pinned in an instant. How had she gotten so good at fighting? Then, she threw something onto my head, and all went black.

~

I knew it as I woke once more in the starry grounds, the lush green woods of StarClan. I had died again. StarClan, surely, wasn't about to give me a third lease of life. I was truly dead, this time, I was sure. She had hit me square in the head. Then again, they'd saved me from a well-slitted throat.

I looked up.

Stonestar stood above me. "Stormdawn," he said huskily. "I'm sorry for the terrible leader I was. But ... this time, we can't give you life again. You have to be reborn."

"Who will I be?" I meowed quietly.

Stonestar sighed. "You will be the sole surviving kit of Coriandermist and Frogleap."

"She died?" I asked.

Stonestar nodded. "She hasn't, but she will. She started kitting after Ashenface ripped open both her flanks."

"What's happening now?" I asked.

"That kit won't move for another moon, though it'll breathe," Stonestar meowed quietly, ignoring my question. "When you're born, I want you to start action immediately. Rally the other kits."

"Excuse me?" I asked. "I, the newborn, rally the other kits?"

Stonestar nodded. "You're a natural leader, Stormdawn."

Then he paused. "Also, just so you remember ... it's Silverkit now."

"Oh, bother," I groaned. "I liked my name."

"Your name will become Silverdusk," He meowed quietly.

I sighed. "Then, when I die, will I be Stormdawn or Silverdusk?"

"You can choose." His eyes sparkled. "Maybe you'll find love as Silverdusk."

"Maybe." I shook my head disbelievingly. I never found love. Absolutely never. I'd tried. Maybe I hadn't really. "I won't be recognized, will I?"

"You might," Stonestar meowed quietly. "You're going to be a mirror of Stormdawn. So you might."

Chapter Eighteen

I awoke in the nursery after spending a relaxing moon in StarClan. I opened my eyes, my piercing violet eyes, and found I was suddenly so tiny. I got up and shook myself. I noticed Honeykit and Hivekit staring. It was weird, staring at them from Silverkit's perspective. They were literally bigger than me, and as Stormdawn, I'd towered over them.

"What?" I asked, my voice something like a squeak.

Hivekit cocked his head. "Silverkit, you woke up for the first time and you can already walk?" He sounded quite curious.

I shrugged.

"And you can shrug? And you can talk?"

"I'm a smart kit," I said. It wasn't entirely a lie. I was a smart kit, though, truly, I wasn't a kit. Hivekit didn't need to know that. Nobody would ever need to know that.

Hivekit frowned back. And then I saw Wheatpelt nursing Nightkit, Fluffykit and Skykit. Well, not nursing.

"Where's my mother?" I asked, trying to play the kit act. It was also an easier way to find out who was my foster mother.

"That's her there! Her name's Appledawn. And that's going to be you new foster mother when she has her kits!" Hivekit pointed energetically. I looked around, and my jaw dropped. Plumwhisker?! She was going to be my foster mother? But Plumwhisker's eyes were softer now. Perhaps mating with Duskypelt had made her mellow.

"I'll try my best, Silverkit," she meowed, and her voice was so gentle, like a soft morning breeze.

I still had to play along. "Why's Appledawn giving me away? Do I have littermates?"

"No," said Hivekit. "They all died!"

"Hivekit!" Honeykit chided. "That's very rude! Your two littermates," she added to me, in a gentler tone, "Sandkit and Stripedkit, they died, along with your mother, Coriandermist, and your father, Frogleap." She smiled at me sympathetically, as if trying to make me feel better. To be honest, I was happier with Hivekit's straightforward answer. I hadn't seen Sandkit or Stripedkit in StarClan, but then again, I'd mainly kept to myself, only seeing cats I wanted to see.

"Oh," I said, "okay." I didn't even cry. I mean, Coriandermist and Frogleap weren't my parents. That purple-eyed white she-cat outside was. I wondered what she was doing here, anyway. She was hardly expecting more kits - who would want her?

"She looks just like my Stormdawn," Peacewind murmured, almost in a loving, motherly way.

I couldn't help myself. "Is that the cat you abandoned?" I squeaked. Luckily, I managed to keep the contempt out of my voice.

Peacewind took a step back. "She talks?" she asked, gawking at me. She was so much bigger!

"Yeah I do, dumb cat!" I muttered.

Peacewind's eyes widened as I insulted her. "She's rude!" Peacewind hissed to Appledawn accusingly.

"I haven't taught her manners yet," Appledawn meowed dismissively. "I didn't even know she could talk until a few moments ago!" Appledawn stared at me lovingly, like a mother should. Peacewind just looked annoyed.

Peacewind narrowed her eyes at me. "Your attitude also reminds me of Stormdawn!" she said, and she laughed.

"Who's Stormdawn?" I played along.

"She used to be deputy." It was Starrynight who replied.

"She always came to visit!" Twilightkit piped up.

"Did she now," Wheatpelt muttered unhappily.

I rolled my eyes at her. Wheatpelt caught the oh-so-familiar movement and let out a small gasp.

"She even rolls her eyes the same way!" Appledawn laughed.

"Did she do a lot of eyerolls on you?" I asked, turning on Wheatpelt. "She must have disliked you!"

"I was like her mother," Wheatpelt meowed. Peacewind stiffened.

"Right!" I squeaked in confirmation. "The mother who ditched her! The two mothers who ditched her!"

Appledawn's eyes narrowed. "How do you know so much?" she asked.

"I'm a smart kit!" I responded lightly. Appledawn's eyes regained some of their usual humor. I was so, so surprised that no one suspected me yet. I had been so obvious! Still, who was I to complain?

~

It took me a whole moon of playing dumb to finally get them to trust me. Inside, my thoughts were all over the place. I knew how to do the hunter's crouch perfectly, and I practiced it whenever no one was looking, like at night. Last night, I pounced on Appledawn's tail. Luckily, she hadn't woken up - Appledawn was a pretty heavy sleeper. Thank goodness, because Twilightkit, Dawnkit and Chivekit played hide-and-seek and whispered all night long. That was awfully annoying, and they still managed to stay awake during the day, yawning a lot, though.

That day, Honeykit and Hivekit were becoming apprentices. Hivekit seemed to like me. Was this the love Stonestar talked about? Because I kind of liked him, too. I caught Zealheart with Glitterpaw, they were together. I almost hissed at them. Cloudysky sat further back, without anyone, looking quite miserable. And then Leafshine

walked up to him and his eyes lit up. He purred as they rubbed cheeks.

Okay, what now? He liked Leafshine? Barely two moons after my death? Disloyal cat.

Then again, I'd never picked him. Was it his fault he'd moved on from the cat he'd tried to love, who'd rejected him time and time again? He should move on to Leafshine. I guess he didn't deserve to live in sorrow of my death.

I saw her then. I'd completely forgotten my promise. Swanflutter, looking hollow. I'd never even visited her dreams her because I'd been reborn. Somehow, selfishly, I'd completely forgotten about my former apprentice.

"Hey!" I bounded up to Swanflutter. "Why're you looking so sad?" I turned on the cute kit look. Swanflutter didn't even smile.

"She's still dead," Swanflutter said dully, turning away from me.

"That shouldn't affect you so much." Lightmist, her stomach bulging – she was probably kitting any day now – stalked up to Swanflutter. "I am your mother."

Swanflutter's eyes narrowed. "Now, are you."

"Stormdawn was your mentor."

"Pretty much my mother," Swanflutter retorted. Her eyes softened. "You look just like her."

"Obviously!" I said. "I've been told that a million times. I also have seen most of these cats too many times. And what happened to Ashenface?" I didn't see her among the crowd.

"You talk like her," Swanflutter purred. Then she stopped. "Who told you about Ashenface?" she asked swiftly.

"Er... the elders?"

"What elders? Pinkeyes and Piketooth and Shinepelt died a long

time ago."

"Er...."

"Firstly," Icestar said, her voice echoing. "Graymist, Echoheart and Riversong are retiring." The three she-cats stepped forward. Retiring? Well, they had been around since as long as I could remember. Oh, wait. As long as Stormdawn could remember. I was Silverdusk – wait, no, Silverkit now. I missed my position as deputy. I hadn't been on it long anyway. My chances were gone. It would be a long time until Silverkit was ready to be deputy. Who was deputy, anyway?

I saw the deputy on the stump, where I used to sit. The deputy was Goldenwind. Well. She was a renowned fighter. She was older than me, in my other lifetime, and much more experienced. Still, Icestar had chosen me because I spoke out. Goldenwind was a quiet cat, and Appledawn's best friend.

"Apart from that, we have new warriors. Lilypaw, Oakpaw and Darkpaw, step forward."

It was hard to believe this. I was so much older than these cats. And yet ... Oakpaw, Darkpaw and Lilypaw. Ashenface was their mother! Yet she was nowhere to be seen. Frogleap, too, although I already knew he was dead. Dead, and lounging in StarClan with his new mate, Coriandermist, whom he'd barely been mates with before they'd both been killed.

At that very moment, Swanflutter leaned over to me. She said, in her usual shy tone – wait, not usual. Swanflutter had warmed up a lot to me. But she'd warmed up to Stormdawn. She was her shy self with Silverkit.

"Ashenface was killed personally by Icestar," Swanflutter meowed quietly. "If you didn't know, she killed our deputy, Stormdawn. She ... she was like my mother." Swanflutter's eyes grew misty.

"I'm sorry to hear that." I blinked. It had been two moons. Two moons, and Swanflutter could still cry over my death. That shocked me.

"She never visited my dreams..." Swanflutter meowed quietly, in almost a pleading way. Then she took a step back. "Whoa, you're a kit! I shouldn't be telling you this."

"I'm her," I whispered.

I made it so Swanflutter couldn't hear. She wasn't supposed to hear, but I loved her. I'd loved Swanflutter as my daughter. Always had. She was still sort of my daughter, but it was so weird now. I mean, Silverkit, Swanflutter's mother? No way. It would even be weird if Swanflutter was my mother.

"Oakbark, Darkwind and Lilypool!"

"Oakbark! Darkwind! Lilypool! Oakbark! Darkwind! Lilypool!"

"Lastly, Honeykit and Hivekit, step forward."

"Honeypaw, your mentor will be Songbird. You have chosen the path of a medicine cat."

I almost nodded as a warrior, then I remembered I was a kit. I couldn't have known Honeykit until a moon ago, so I shouldn't have known her choices. But I still almost nodded. This was what Honeykit wanted, wasn't it? Poor Honeykit, though. She was so pretty and gorgeous, a tom was bound to pad after her after a while. Then she might have to redecide her path. We already had lots of medicine cats.

"Hivepaw, your mentor will be Stripetail."

The striped brown tom broke away from Fallowmist to touch noses with Hivepaw. I saw Swanflutter's eyes darken.

Then she turned, surprisingly, to me. "You look so much like her," she breathed. "The same eyes, the same fur. Your attitude – it's just like hers." She purred softly.

"I am her," I whispered again, and once again so softly it was blown away by the breeze.

"She mothered me. I'll mother you," Swanflutter meowed quietly.

"Stormdawn – she never found a mate. She never was a true mother. But she was a mother to many, if only a half-mother. She promised to help Wheatpelt raise Fluffykit, Nightkit, and Skykit, but then Wheatpelt treated her awfully. So, she stopped." Swanflutter paused to breathe. Somehow, I didn't mind hearing about my past self, the great cat, Stormdawn. "She mentored me then, and Lightmist and Hollowmist never cared – Lightmist is still expecting that litter Stormdawn suspected, due any day now along with Plumwhisker – and Stormdawn was like my mother. I loved her, Silverkit. I really loved her."

"I understand," I meowed instantly. It was the thing cats wanted to hear, and then a comforting. I'd understood that part as Stormdawn. Swanflutter's ears perked, though. I wasn't supposed to understand, not as Silverkit.

"I wonder if she got reincarnated in you," Swanflutter meowed quietly, with a small purr. "You're her, in almost everything. And that would explain why I never was visited by her in my dreams." She peered curiously at me, almost looking hopeful.

"Maybe!" I replied, forcing in enthusiasm.

Hivepaw walked my way, so I ran over. I really did like him. He was likeable. "Congrats!" I told him softly. He was four moons older than me, but still, we felt like a match. In a way ... Zealheart and I had never been. If he could ditch me for Glitterpaw...

"Thank you!" Hivepaw purred, pressing himself against me and licking my ears. It was a funny feeling. "Don't worry, four moons, and you'll join me in the den!"

I shook my head doubtfully. "If you're good, which you will be, you'll be made a warrior at that time."

Hivepaw shrugged ruefully. "We could have one night together!"

I just laughed. "Don't think so. You're four moons and a bit older than me. So, your ceremony will be what, two days before mine?"

Hivepaw shrugged indifferently, then went to Stripetail, but not

before turning back and saying, "Well then, I could be your mentor!"

I laughed softly to myself, before turning back to the nursery and my foster mother. Appledawn was a kind cat, she'd always been to Stormdawn and she was to me too. Silverkit. I'd need to get used to that, and to being called a kit.

"Hey, you look bored, little Silverkit!" It was Leafshine, a cat I'd barely known in my other lifetime, and she walked up to me.

"Uh... hi?" I asked.

"Do you want to learn the hunters' crouch?" she asked.

"I'm two moons old, Leafshine."

Leafshine's eyes widened. "That's never stopped a kit before!" She looked genuinely shocked. Wait, what? I thought only weaned kits were interested in apprentice things. Maybe I was wrong. I was really playing my kit part badly.

"Oh, okay." I had yet to learn about being a kit. My childhood seemed like so long ago (and I didn't even write it in this book).

"Here, like this, bend – what!"

I had slid, familiarly, into the hunter's crouch, bending low, and I'd done it perfectly – even perfecter than Leafshine.

"Someone taught you already?" Leafshine asked, changing her stance a little so it looked a bit more like mine. I felt satisfaction.

"I watched the apprentices practice in the clearing," I said defensively.

Leafshine frowned. "I've never seen you there," she meowed, frowning, then walked off.

Lilypool stopped by to play with the kits, but I stayed away, because I wasn't in for playing. Instead, I stayed just outside behind the nursery, and I practiced fighting moves and stretching so I got

more muscled.

Hopefully, that would be soon.

Chapter Nineteen

By the time a moon passed, my joints were aching a lot of the time, but I was a heavily muscled kit. By that time, Plumwhisker and Lightmist had kitted. Plumwhisker had been poorly suited for kitting, and all her litter had died – Graykit and Tallkit. Lightmist had had a single she-cat, Tawnykit, who was a stuck-up prat. Now all my denmates were leaving, leaving only Tawnykit. Appledawn said she'd stay, but Plumwhisker had pulled me close, still sad about her loss of kits.

"Fluffykit, Nightkit, Skykit, Dawnkit, Twilightkit and Chivekit, step forward. Fluffypaw, your mentor will be Fallowmist. Nightpaw, your mentor will be Leafshine. Skypaw, your mentor will be Cloudysky. Dawnpaw, your mentor will be Sunnyheart. Twilightpaw, your mentor will be Mistfur. Chivepaw, your mentor will be Duskypelt."

We all cheered their names quite loudly. I sadly said goodbye to Twilightpaw. We'd gotten quite close, even though she was three moons older than me. I would be with her in three moons, and if I was lucky, Hivepaw too, but he'd probably be a warrior. I wanted to laugh. Technically, I wasn't too young to experience feelings for other cats. But in this lifetime, I was still a three-moon-old kit. I wasn't supposed to be able to comprehend these things. But I couldn't care less.

Honestly, whoever got me would find I was already so experienced! I hid almost all the time, practicing battle moves and the hunter's crouch over and over again so I wouldn't be rusty. The moment any cat came, I deliberately fell, and they would just laugh in sympathy.

Hivepaw came up to me. "Hey, not so long until you're an apprentice, right?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "There's no need to rub it in, Hivepaw."

He grimaced obviously. "Um ... sorry." Then he licked my ears. "But,

you know, I thought you'd put up with these things."

"Humor me," I said, rolling my eyes. "I'm a bit too old to put up with anything." I let out a small gasp, realizing I'd just instinctively answered as Stormdawn. Stop it, me, you're Silverkit now!

Hivepaw grinned. "Old, are you? Heh!" Great StarClan, it was a relief to see him walk off without suspecting anything, and I rarely ever say Great StarClan.

Appledawn stepped up to me. "Um, Silverkit?"

"Yes, mother?" I asked. Appledawn smiled softly.

Just then, I saw my actual mother walk by. Peacewind took one glance at me, stuck her nose high in the air and stalked away.

"I'm going back to warrior duties," Appledawn meowed. "I'm so sorry. Browntail has been missing me, and anyway, Amberfire and Lightmist are going to mother you."

"Amberfire..." I frowned suddenly. "I don't remember her having her kits!"

"She did," Appledawn meowed miserably. "She kitted alongside Plumwhisker, and they both lost their kits. One of hers, Streamkit, survived, but she's so weak, she's in the medicine den."

"Oh, okay," I meowed, trying to sound sad. That was really hard with this squeaky kit voice thing.

I suddenly realized if my mother was Lightmist now, I'd be with stuck-up Tawnykit.

Just as Appledawn walked away.

I suddenly realized, all kits snuck out of camp once in a while, right? Shouldn't I do the same? If only to remember my territory.

I did that, sneaking out of a familiar tiny gap in the wall. As Stormdawn, I'd always known it was there but never been able to use it, but now, I was this tiny kit! Of course I could use it, if that

was the only thing good about my current size.

Due to all my training, I wasn't even tired after walking the whole territory. I walked it again, weaving in between trees and breathing in familiar scents. Oh, I remembered! The rose patch! Where had it gone? I sniffed the air, and I went there. To my absolute horror, there was a cat there, and her eyes snapped up immediately.

"Silverkit?" Swanflutter gawked. "What are you doing here? Wait! You're out of camp, you pesky kit!" But there was humor in her eyes, and she pulled me close.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, because for once, I really didn't know.

"She's buried here," Swanflutter whispered. "Stormdawn. I come when I can."

Swanflutter was so sweet! "That's really nice of you," I meowed quietly, and I meant it, as Stormdawn herself.

"Wait, Silverkit," Swanflutter meowed, "how come you didn't get lost?"

"Um...." I meowed. "I've snuck out before and I pretty much know the whole territory by heart..." It was a lie, but it was actually true, part of it. I did know the territory by heart.

"Silly kit," Swanflutter groaned, standing up. "Come on, let's go."

"Wait, no! I forgot to visit the sandy hollow!"

Swanflutter rolled her eyes. "We don't use that anymore! It became a quicksand pit after a storm."

"Wait, what?" I asked, actually expressing real shock.

"We have the stone hollow now," Swanflutter meowed, "which you will see in three moons, and no sooner."

I stuck my tongue out. "You don't even know how I escaped camp!"

Swanflutter sighed. "Do I even want to know?"

~

Swanflutter dropped me off at the nursery, which really felt so weird, and then she left me alone there, Lightmist was missing and the only person there was Tawnykit. Inwardly, I groaned as I walked into the nursery and saw her.

"Get me a mouse!" she demanded.

"You," I said, with an eyeroll, "are one moon old. Far too young."

"And you are three!" she snapped. "Gimme a mouse!"

"You can get it yourself," I meowed, settling back down and resting my head on my paws.

"Hi there, kits!"

Glitterpaw? Oh, apprentice duties. I forgot! I stood up, my tail smacking Tawnykit's face, and looked up at Glitterpaw.

"Yes?" I asked, and annoyance came out before I could stop it.

Glitterpaw took a step back. "Wh-what?"

"If you really want to be a warrior," I meowed matter-of-factly, "You shouldn't be scared of kits."

"And you, a kit, are lecturing me?" Glitterpaw bared her teeth.

I scoffed. "I can fight better than you can!" I'd learnt new techniques to cope with my size already!

"Fine, let's fight!" Glitterpaw growled.

I did. I ran around her, jabbing at every area I could reach. I even poked her in the eye once, then hopped onto her back, got an ivy vine and used it like a leash. I rode Glitterpaw around camp, and everyone saw. Zealheart's jaw dropped, and with it fell out his rabbit.

"Is this a game?" Zealheart meowed.

"No!" I snapped. "I bested her fairly in a duel!"

Laughter erupted from around camp. Now, if I'd said that as Stormdawn, they would have stared at Glitterpaw and mocked her. But I guess no one took Silverkit seriously.

"Seriously, Glitterpaw?" Hivepaw rolled his eyes. "Good job, Silverkit!" He meowed, praising, and helped me off Glitterpaw's back.

Glitterpaw grumbled, and reached out for Zealheart, but even he avoided her.

Icestar came out of her den. "Silverkit! Can I speak with you?"

"Sure, why not," I responded.

Icestar's jaw dropped.

"Uh-huh?" I asked. "What? Am I supposed to say 'Yes, Lady Icestar, naturally it is my pleasure to talk to you'? Come to think of it, there are about a dozen better things I could be doing, and there's no way I'm an apprentice so early." I lifted my tail high as Icestar's jaw dipped further.

"I should scold you!" she growled.

"'Should'," I mocked, "implies that you're not going to do it. Why, I must wonder? Are you too scared?"

Appledawn stepped forward. "Storm – Silverkit!" she gasped.

"Am I Stormsilverkit now?" I asked. "Or did you mistake me for someone? Am I already good enough to be deputy?"

Appledawn was so caught by surprise, she actually laughed nervously. She caught Icestar's gaze and said, "She really does sound so much like Stormdawn, the same rebellious spirit too."

"Naturally," I said, and I almost said 'I am Stormdawn', before

remembering and instead saying, "Isn't every kit rebellious?"

"Not like you!" Appledawn responded. "Oh, by the way, Icestar – did you know she was touring the territory on her own? She found Swanflutter, thank goodness, it could've been a fox!"

"If it was a fox, I'd fight it!" I bared my teeth. I would do that, but from a kit, I looked overconfident.

Appledawn laughed again, but Icestar's eyes narrowed. "Coming to that," the snow-white leader meowed softly, "Silverkit, you know an awful lot about fighting."

"That I do," I responded easily.

Icestar frowned. "You bested Glitterpaw. She's not the best, but she's full-grown. How did you do that?"

"Oh, Glitterpaw, the great deputy's sister?" I asked. "Well, she is not that great. She was scared of me, and lost to me too!" I was probably overdoing the confidence. But who cared.

Icestar stared, a little too flatly. "Silverkit, this attitude is going to get you in trouble."

"You said I'm like your deputy! Was she in trouble?" I asked in a half-whisper, almost daring Icestar to say yes.

"No," answered Icestar ruefully. "That Stormdawn was a troublemaker, but she really did have good ideas and she spoke up. But she didn't sneak out of camp."

"The author never wrote about her kit days!" I responded lightly. "Maybe she did!"

Icestar groaned. "Let's not say that, Silverkit. Stop sneaking out. You promise me?"

"Unfortunately," I said, "I cannot promise that, lest you want me to break yet another promise of mine."

Icestar stared. "She is too matured," she muttered under her breath,

and then waved me away.

I could hardly express the shock I was feeling that she actually sent me away, but it was mixed with relief too. I returned to the nursery where I was obviously scarcely welcome, and I saw Tawnykit playing with Lightmist's half-eaten mouse. Disgusted, I left the nursery immediately and went to find Hivepaw.

He came back looking miserable, and I ran up to him immediately. "Are you okay?" I asked, but even my presence didn't make his eyes light up like they normally did.

"No," He muttered, and I sat next to him, looking up at him with my big, round kit-eyes. "Stripetail was not there," He meowed faintly. "And when he came, he was with Fallowmist, and he scolded me. For not being there early, and I was. Then he said he'd asked to meet at the sandy hollow, which is quicksand, and not the regular stone hollow. He had me training for so long." Hivepaw looked exhausted.

"I'm sorry," I meowed sympathetically.

"You don't get to be sorry for anything," Hivepaw meowed quietly. "You've never done anything wrong to me, Silverkit. Never. Everyone else has, but you ... you've always been perfect."

Perfect? Me? "Perfect?" I voiced my thoughts out loud. "Well, once you hear that I toured the territory on my own and bothered Swanflutter, I'll be less than perfect!"

Hivepaw laughed, the mood lightening. "You have your adventurous side!" he joked – or was he joking? "Thank you for coming, Silverkit," he meowed, softer. "It means a lot."

"You're welcome!" I squeaked. "I'll come any time!"

"I'll be your mentor someday," he meowed.

"With the emphasis on someday," I said. He cuffed my ear, but playfully, and he was smiling now.

"You should go get some food," I advised him, with a knowing look

in my eyes. He grimaced as his stomach rumbled.

"You want to share?" he asked. "You eat solid food now, right?"

"Duh," I said, with an eye-roll, and he grinned again.

Hivepaw picked a thrush for us to share. I'd always liked thrushes, and I stole some of the feathers for my own nest. Hivepaw raised his eyebrows at me.

"I'm not an apprentice yet," I declared. "These feathers are mine."

Hivepaw grinned back, and swiped some for his own nest. In the end, he brought a meagre three feathers to the elders, and proclaimed to them that the bird had been like that, almost no feathers, when caught. Echoheart was a kindly cat, and she smiled and agreed, but Riversong, who had always been slightly fiercer, stared down at Hivepaw with a furrowed brow. Graymist just sighed. She knew all about apprentices' antics – apparently, Heathermist had been quite the apprentice when Graymist trained her.

I was there, watching, the whole time, and I grinned as Riversong slapped Hivepaw's head and shooed him out.

"Quiet, you!" Riversong barked. "First you come in with no feathers on you, just that three, and then you talk so loudly! Shoo!"

"You'd think Riversong had been an elder for moons,"Graymist muttered. The three she-cats were littermates, and they did joke around a lot, but Riversong whipped around to snap at her littermate, and it was Echoheart's turn to sigh.

Hivepaw escaped safely while Riversong snapped at Graymist, and looked at me where I hid among the brambles. "You watched," he said flatly, but he was smiling. Then he looked concerned. "Get out of there, Silverkit, you'll get injured by the brambles."

I frowned, looking around. Sure enough, I was wedged between two or three brambles, and they were poking into my fur. I'd thought that was a nice massage, with Stormdawn's pain tolerance, but now I realized my side was bleeding. Oops. Too much experience

fighting foxes and getting killed.

"Didn't feel it," I muttered, pulling myself out of the bramble bush.

Hivepaw stared for a moment, then brought me to Emuwing.

"You hid among the brambles?" Emuwing asked exasperatedly. "What for?" She bent down to sniff my wounds, then sighed. "Not serious," she muttered, then put on some cobwebs and marigold. It was so familiar to Stormdawn, but it made my little kit legs shake.

I shook myself, annoyed, and steadied myself. Emuwing stared in shock.

"First kit who didn't cry," she mumbled to herself, applying the last of marigold. "You can go," she said. There was something empty about her gaze. As I left, I heard her muttering, "I should've done a Stormdawn and scolded that kit."

I smiled hesitantly. Would I have scolded myself? You know what, yes I would.

Chapter Twenty

~ three moons later ~

"Hivepaw, step forward." Icestar meowed crisply.

I watched, anguished. He had passed – I had expected him to – but that meant I wouldn't train with him. I should be angry at myself for being so selfish, but once he knew he'd passed, he himself had expressed some sadness that he wouldn't be with me. We hadn't shared a den in four moons, and it was going to be like that for four more.

"Hivepaw, from this moment onwards you will be known as Hiveclaw."

"Hiveclaw! Hiveclaw!"

I cheered him on with the Clan, calling softly, but I'd adapted to a softspoken personality as Silverkit anyway. Hiveclaw looked at the supporting Clan, and his eyes fell on me, quietly chanting his name, and he smiled.

"Silverkit, step forward."

Hiveclaw stepped back. So, he wasn't going to be my mentor. That would be odd, though. Anyway, whoever was my mentor would be ... frustrated, let's say.

"Silverpaw, your mentor will be Swanflutter."

The white she-cat looked up, then took a small step back. "I – I don't think I'm ready, Icestar."

Icestar frowned. "You've been a warrior for a while. I gave Stripetail an apprentice already, and he was in your batch."

Swanflutter was still shaking her head. "I haven't gotten over loss," the white she-cat, my former apprentice, meowed quietly. "I – I

can't do this. Not without her. I need her."

I cocked my head in expectance, though I knew the 'her'. Swanflutter couldn't do it without my Stormdawn side, and ... she needed me.

But, there was nothing I could do. I sighed quietly. Swanflutter shot me an apologetic glance and stepped back.

"Well .... Then...." Icestar muttered, clearly at a loss. "Um, your mentor will be Duckstep."

That was certainly random, and I also knew Duckstep was stupid. He'd been Peacewind's apprentice, after all. Couldn't I have gotten Lilypool or something? Well, the stupid tom would be bragging about how good I was with his training. Oh well.

~in the morning~

I woke at dawn, and waited patiently. I always woke at dawn. As deputy, that had become routine for me. I waited and waited. Fallowmist, Cloudysky, Leafshine, Duskypelt, Sunnyheart and Mistfur all came and picked up their apprentices for training, and I continued waiting. Suddenly, Hiveclaw poked his head in.

"Whoa – you're still here?" he asked.

"Sure I am," I muttered dully. "Some mouse-brain isn't keen on showing his face."

"It must be ugly then!" Hiveclaw laughed. "Where's Duckstep?"

"He's that ugly mouse-brain we were just talking about," I said flatly.

Then, under his constant bright smile, my hard expression cracked slightly. His grin widened.

Just then, yawning, probably half-asleep and unsteady on his feet, Duckstep came.

"Oh – uh – hey Silverpaw, you want to go out now?"

"I've been awake since dawn!" I glared at him. "Can you try to wake before sunrise, sleepyhead? I thought I was the apprentice and you were the mentor!"

"Wh-wha?" he asked.

I shook my head furiously. "Come on!"

Duckstep was literally following me around the territory, and kept yawning. Finally, after I passed the Great Sycamore, the Great Redwood, and the Great Oak, he finally thought to point out the Great Banyan to me.

"There – the Great Banyan," he said, blinking rapidly. "We must have taken a roundabout route! We didn't pass the three other Great trees, did we?"

"We did," I said flatly. "Sycamore, Redwood, Oak, am I right?"

Duckstep paused, then nodded. "Y... yeah. Hiveclaw told you?"

"More like they're big enough," I growled.

Then he snapped out of sleep mode, finally. "Why are you in front?" he asked, frowning.

"Because you were sleepwalking, and someone had to lead us through the territory?" I glared at him.

"Sleepwalking!" Duckstep scoffed. "Well, let's do some hunting practice. Crouch – like this..."

"Are you supposed to be sticking your butt in the air?" I asked flatly, almost exasperatedly. I was scolding my own mentor, for StarClan's sake! Oh. Wow. I was swearing by StarClan a lot more lately. Perhaps it was because Duckstep and Tawnykit were so exasperating and frustrating.

I sat, watching, as Duckstep's bum shot right up and was high in the air, and his tail wiggled a little.

"What is that?" I groaned.

"The crou – oop!" Duckstep quickly lowered his butt. His crouch was far from perfect, but I didn't tell him so. Instead, I lowered into mine, so easily I adjusted into that stance, my perfect hunter's crouch.

"Not bad," Duckstep conceded. What? 'Not bad'? It had been way better than his!

"Can I try solo hunting?" I asked Duckstep.

"You're a little young, what if you don't bring anything back?" Duckstep asked doubtfully.

"I will," I promised.

"If you say so!" he said, and walked off. I listened intently, and I heard and saw him meet the sunrise hunting patrol.

"Where's your apprentice?" Ashdust was asking.

"Did you leave her somewhere?" Appledawn gawked.

"Keep your fur on!" Duckstep laughed. "She asked to solo hunt, so I let her!"

"Duckstep!" gasped Woodfur. "She's six moons old! Of course she'd want to solo hunt! But you can't let her!"

"What's done is done," Duckstep announced, and I stopped listening in and got back to my hunt.

Usually, these tiny legs would've been bad for hunting, but I weaved through tiny gaps and after my training as a kit, my legs were well muscled and good for leaping. I'd made sure of that, once realizing my legs were so tiny and weak at birth, and there was no way I could adapt.

Finally, I carried my catches. They didn't quite fit in my mouth, but I managed to hang two mice by their tails, so it worked out. I had three mice and a fat rabbit.

I stopped by the camp entrance, and Appledawn ran over.

"Silverpaw!" she gasped. "Icestar sent out search patrols for you!"

"Why?" I asked. "I was only hunting." I dropped my catches on the ground, waiting expectantly.

"Only..." Appledawn sighed. "Silverpaw, you're basically a kit! Wait ... are those ALL your catches?"

"Yes," I said. "Should I have caught more?" I cocked my head. I mean, I could've stayed out longer, but I did expect them to worry. Especially Hiveclaw.

"No!" Appledawn disagreed forcefully. "That's a lot there, for you, a brand new apprentice ... is Duckstep that good? I thought he was stupid..."

"He is," I agreed helpfully. "I perfected the hunter's crouch earlier on in my life." In my other life, I said to myself, those four words, what Appledawn would really have needed to know, she could not hear.

Appledawn frowned. "During childhood? I'm not going to say it's not surprising..." Then she beamed at me. "But I should've expected this from Frogleap's kit! He was always a great hunter." She looked over, frowning slightly, at Darkwind, Oakbark and Lilypool, who were sharing prey together, staring at the sky. "Frogleap is their father, too, but their mother is Ashenface." Appledawn sighed, glancing at Silverpelt as well. "Ashenface might've killed Stormdawn, but I still hope she made it to StarClan. She was driven mad when Frogleap abandoned her for her best friend, Coriandermist, your mother."

"I heard she had a bloody death," I mused.

Appledawn's eyes widened. "Riversong had better tone down her tales!" she gasped, looking shocked, but some of that was feigned. Appledawn's eyes were misty, though. "I knew Coriandermist," she meowed sadly. "We were good friends, and she's Birdcry's sister. I don't think anyone around your age or some forty moons older knew him – even Stormdawn never got to meet him. Birdcry was really close with Amberfire, but I suppose he died before she could bear his kits."

If only you knew, I thought, thinking of Hazelshade. I really should go visit her soon.

The moment I broke away from Appledawn, I snuck out to the forest, heading for Twolegplace. I easily dodged the hunting patrol of Firespring, Shadowheart, Sunbright and Spidertail.

(I know I ended it really awkwardly but I'm kind of bad at endings. Also, I don't even think anyone is reading this)

Chapter Twenty-one

Finally, I caught sight of Twolegplace. It didn't really spark a memory – to be honest, I hadn't been there much. Now ... Hazelshade's kits would be five moons old. Would they have been given away by the Twolegs already? I listened hard, and Littlecloud was talking to Hazelshade in a hushed voice. Wait. Hadn't I brought her to the Clan? That was all I remembered. She'd caused Icestar to kill Stonestar!

What was going on?

"I should've stayed in SeasonClan!" Hazelshade sounded infuriated. "What's wrong with you, Littlecloud? Why did you make me come back? My kits are GONE NOW!"

That was it. Hazelshade had come back because her mate had asked her to, and now she hated him.

"I'm sure Berrykit, Leafkit, Cloudkit and Mosskit will be happy in their new homes," Littlecloud soothed her.

Hazelshade shook her head, then noticed my silver face at the window.

"Is that Stormdawn?" Hazelshade asked, meeting my familiar violet eyes.

I hopped down from the window sill and entered through the cat flap. "No," I told her. "My name is Silverpaw."

"Are you Stormdawn's daughter?" Hazelshade asked doubtfully. "I thought she couldn't find a mate." She was frowning intently at me.

"I have no relation to Stormdawn," I told her – that was true, though Stormdawn's spirit rested inside of me. "I am Silverpaw, the daughter of Frogleap and Coriandermist."

"Wait, what?" asked Littlecloud. "Wasn't he with Ashenface? What

about Lilypaw, Darkpaw, and Oakpaw?"

"Lilypool, Darkwind and Oakbark are fine," I told him dismissively.

"Where is she?" Hazelshade looked around. "Stormdawn. She said she'd come to meet them ... my little ones ... but they're gone." She sounded so anguished, but I had no words to comfort her.

"Come to SeasonClan," I said.

Hazelshade nodded. "These Twolegs have brought me nothing but grief."

"We'll steal your kits back!" I announced.

Hazelshade shook her head. "The Twolegs brought them into a monster, all four of them."

"Some must still be here," I told her. "Not all, obviously. But maybe you'll get back a kit or two."

"How long ago did they go?" I asked.

"Two weeks," Hazelshade meowed quietly, with a sad expression.

I nodded and escaped her Twoleg den through the window. I sniffed. I couldn't possibly know what Hazelshade's kits smelled like, but I did, anyways. I tracked Moss - Mosskit, but her name was probably Moss now – back to Eagletail and Kyla's den. What?

Kyla was nursing. She had three baby kittens with – ugh – collars. More cats were around her, with collars as well. They appeared to be from Eagletail and Kyla's first litter. There was also another she-cat – her collar said Myla – probably Kyla's sister. The first litter was Amber, Saffron and Topaz, all she-cats. Her new litter had Smokey, Blackie and Shawna, two toms and a she-cat. Seriously? Eagletail didn't give them Clan names? I was disappointed. Crouched at the corner of their den was a tortoiseshell she-cat – Moss.

"Moss!" I whispered.

Moss looked up. "Hey. Are you ... wait, silver fur, purple eyes... you're Stormdawn! Why are you so small?"

"Not Stormdawn," I said. "Silverpaw. D'you wanna get outta here?"

"Obviously!" Moss got up and shook herself. "Have you seen my parents? Where's Hazel and Little?"

Hazel and Little? I wondered. So, they didn't actually name them warrior names. That was really, really off, and really, really weird.

"I mean," Moss backtracked, "Hazelly Shade and Little Clouds." She grinned innocently.

That didn't sound quite right. What kind of names had they told their kits they had? Hazelly Shade? What kind of name was that? Little Clouds? They seemed to have altered their names to sound more ... house catty. I didn't like that already.

"Believe it or not," Moss continued, "they called me Mossy Foot! They said my name would be Mossy Foot, but my name was Mossy Kit or something! So weird! I asked the other housecats, Tanya and Jessy, and they don't have funny names!"

"That's where you're going," I told her. "To live with wildcats. You'll have a name like mine, Mosspaw or Mossypaw."

"Oh." Moss looked almost disappointed, then she sat up, intrigued. "Are my parents there? I wanna see Hazelly Shade!"

"For one," I told her, "Her name is Hazelshade, and your father's is Littlecloud. One word. They're both former Clan cats."

"Oh cool!" Moss meowed, looking intrigued again. "Let's go!"

"Do your littermates live around here?" I asked her.

"I dunno!" Moss grinned. "Kyla said they were being shipped to Taiwan!"

"Where ... where are we?" I asked.

"I dunno, they said we're in Connecticut!" Moss smiled.

I'd have to ask Zealheart where Connecticut and Taiwan were, but the names sounded too different to be in the same area. That meant Moss's siblings were long gone – two weeks. That was probably enough time to get by, especially if they rode those monsters. (Whatever the case, cats who live in the forest would not know about airplanes)

"Come," I gestured to her.

"Wait, Leaf's somewhere around here though!" Moss meowed brightly. "She was in the nest next to mine, last I checked."

I nodded briefly to her, thenmotioned with my tail. Moss followed eagerly, a spring in her step. We got to the next Twoleg den, and I almost wished we hadn't.

There, Leaf was practically being shredded by the other cats. I jumped in through the window. They might have funny housecat battle skills, but they were no match for a warrior! I jumped in and tackled all three of them, using the leap and escape tactic I'd invented during childhood. I scratched one across the eyes, blinding him and causing him to shriek, then moved on to the other two, jumping and kicking one hard in the chest, winding him, and slashing the other across the flank. I repeated this several times, and still the housecats couldn't really retaliate.

Leaf, bleeding from several non-fatal wounds on her body, crouched at one side, watching in awe as I demolished her denmates. Her eyes widened considerably, and she looked to Moss, frowning, and Moss just shrugged.

I kicked the blinded tom on top of the other two in a frenzied heap and held out my paw to Leaf.

"We need to get out," I said. "Hazelshade and Littlecloud are coming, are you?"

"You mean Hazelly Shade and Little Clouds?" Leaf asked, as confused as Moss had been. She winced from her wounds. "Aww

man, I'm gonna be brought to the vet!"

"You're not," I told her dismissively. "We're going to SeasonClan."

"Awwwwwwww!" Leaf gasped.

"Cute, is it?" I demanded softly and dangerously. "Do you find me cute?"

"Behind you," Leaf meowed. "So cute!"

"Awwww, is it a puppy?" Moss crooned.

I looked behind me. A weird dog was standing there! (Corgi) The dog cocked his head and ran over to attack! I jumped back, hissing, and it looked confused.

"It's saying hi!" Leaf meowed eagerly. "Hi, Cookie!"

The dog barked excitedly, moving over to Leaf to sniff her, then licked her ears. It did the same with Moss. I stared.

"They're not all unfriendly," Moss told me.

The dog – Cookie, apparently – barked happily, said hi to Moss and Leaf and then left.

"Okayyy?" I asked doubtfully.

We went back to Hazelshade and Littlecloud's Twoleg nest, and they joined us readily. Hazelshade looked sad that we hadn't found Cloud and Berry, the two toms. That left us with their two daughters. Littlecloud looked the saddest – duh, what tom wanted only his two daughters found and the sons still missing?

We got back to camp, and Icestar gave a happy exclamation upon seeing Hazelshade, her long lost foster daughter. She immediately ran over to Hazelshade and cooed over her.

"You left that time!" Icestar gasped. "Where did you go? It was him, wasn't it?" She glared accusingly at Littlecloud and Hazelshade nodded sorrowfully, looking slightly angry as well. "Oh well! Are

these your kits? What happened to that one?" She looked over at Leaf, and her eyes fell on me. "SILVERPAW!" she yelled my name furiously, and even Hazelshade took a step back. "Where in the name of STARCLAN did you go?"

"She came for us!" Leaf meowed excitedly. "She killed like, the three kittypets attacking me!"

"You killed..." Icestar's eyes moved over to me. "Silverpaw, you haven't had any battle training."

"I have my ways," I said, with a mysterious wink.

"And you're injured!" Hiveclaw ran over. Only he could have spotted the tiny scratch on my flank, and only he could've gotten concerned over it.

"Hiveclaw," Fluffypaw meowed in her annoying high-pitched voice. She moved over to him and whispered softly in his ear.

"What?" Hiveclaw glowered at me suddenly.

"Naturally," I said. "I forgot this happens with all toms." My tail high, I stalked off. Believing whatever lies Fluffypaw had told him, was he? I was pretty sure Fluffypaw liked him anyways. I was sure he'd be so, so happy with Wheatpelt's daughter. The daughter I'd helped raise ... a little.

Icestar, surprisingly, broke away from Hazelshade and called me to her den.

"I reject," I said flatly, turning away from her and walking off.

"That was an order, Silverpaw!" Icestar hollered.

"I reject your order," I said sullenly.

Icestar spoke softly. "As your grandmother, I'm asking you to come."

For that fraction of time, I forgot I was Silverpaw. I entered her den, believing I was Stormdawn again and Icestar was my grandmother.

As soon as I was in, she closed the lichen entrance and smiled. "I caught you, Stormdawn," she said, smiling. "It's you, isn't it? You're in Silverpaw's body. You got reincarnated! That's why you're so good at hunting, and fighting, and you knew to get Hazelshade. And why you talk back – you always did that as Stormdawn, didn't you?"

"You already know, don't you?"

Icestar nodded. "Tell Swanflutter," she told me. "She needs you, Storm – Silverpaw."

"How did you find out?" I asked defeatedly.

"I had my suspicions," Icestar breathed. "And then you said the thing about 'all toms'. Now, I know the she-cat with the most tom lovers – who had rejected them or been betrayed by them all – was Stormdawn."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "They were all fake, their love was fake. The moment I rejected them, they didn't even sulk. They immediately moved on. Duskypelt to Plumwhisker when I was still alive back then. Then, two moons after my death, Cloudysky with Leafshine, and way before that even, my newest, the one I picked, Zealheart with Glitterpaw."

I looked accusingly outside, seeing right through the lichen overhangs, and spotted Zealheart and Glitterpaw together, watching Silverpelt.

Icestar looked sadly at me. "If you say so," she said. "I'm going to transfer you to the river cats."

"What?" I asked.

"They don't have enough," Icestar meowed. "Almost none of us have even laid eyes on the river cats before. We've neglected them too long."

"Oh ... okay," I nodded.

"I thought you would mind," Icestar meowed, surprised. "What's

between you and Hiveclaw?"

"This will be a test," I said. "Ask a warrior to accompany me to live there. If he truly loves me, he will follow." With that, I turned away and walked off.

"Let all cats gather below the High Rock for a Clan meeting!"

We all gathered there.

"The river cats don't have enough cats," said Icestar. "I'm sending our newest apprentice there. Silverpaw. Do any of you want to accompany her there? I'd allow at the most five extra cats to join her."

"I'll go!" Twilightpaw meowed immediately. "Silverpaw is my best friend!" The way she spoke, like she was younger than me. I smiled gratefully at Twilightpaw and she beamed back. "We'll have to restart training, so we'll be warriors at the same time!" she exclaimed, beaming.

"I'll go too," Swanflutter volunteered quietly.

Swanflutter? Oh, right. She had said she'd mother me.

Hiveclaw moved forward, and Fluffypaw pulled on his tail.

"Ouch!" He meowed, then glowered at her. "What is that for? Great StarClan, you insolent cat!" Then he looked to Icestar. "I'm going with her too." He fixed his eyes on me. It showed some betrayal, but his love burned deeper than the hurt of whatever he believed I'd done to him.

He looked surprised when Fluffypaw volunteered to come as well, but even more surprised when that was all. He looked to all the toms in the Clan, left and right, frowning.

I knew it, then. He believed I'd cheated on him. That was what Fluffypaw had told him. I hadn't, and he realized that now, for the look he spared for Fluffypaw was filled with hatred. The she-cat blinked innocently and rapidly. She loved him, I thought.

Honeypaw, Starrynight and Dogspring stared at Hiveclaw, almost longingly. I looked to Nightpaw and Skypaw and saw the same reaction, but Wheatpelt looked indifferent to her daughter leaving. Well, not completely leaving, but shouldn't Wheatpelt at least be sad? They'd sent me because I had no connections, obviously, and not because I was a new apprentice. I myself bid goodbye to Hazelshade's family. Leaf and Moss were probably going to become apprentices, but I wouldn't be there.

Icestar led us to the border. Myself, Swanflutter, Hiveclaw and Fluffypaw. I remembered, I was supposed to tell Swanflutter who I was.

A purplish she-cat came out of the water, shaking herself and then walking over, dipping her head politely. "Hello," she said, smiling. "My name is Eveningprimrose."

"That's a mouthful," I commented, before I could stop myself. Eveningprimrose nodded.

"I know, it's a type of flower and Minkfur thought she was being creative," Eveningprimrose meowed with a grin.

Icestar nodded to me. "Minkfur is the leader of the river cats."

"Oh," I said, frowning slightly.

What, Minkfur? River? Not quite fitting ... what was a mink anyway?

Fluffypaw looked frightened of Eveningprimrose and had flattened herself against Hiveclaw's body. He stared down at her, his amber gaze burning and even more frightening, but Fluffypaw stayed.

"Get lost," he grumbled.

I moved over to Swanflutter as Eveningprimrose led us to the river cats' camp.

"Oh, hi, Silverpaw," she meowed softly.

"'Silverpaw'?" For a split second I forgot who I was, and that was all

it took for Swanflutter to narrow her eyes suspiciously. "Oh, sorry." I pulled away from her prying eyes. "That was rude."

Swanflutter shook her head. "Something about you is off," she said, sniffing me intently.

"Nothing off," I muttered, moving backwards.

"Are you ... her?" she asked finally. "Are you Stormdawn? I won't be mad."

"I am," I whispered softly. "StarClan gave me a new lease of life."

Swanflutter broke into a beam and nuzzled me. I used to do this to her, except now she was the bigger cat.

"You two over there!" Icestar barked, and we followed.

"Hi!" It turned out to be an apprentice, Blazepaw. He was a bright orange tom.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Silverpaw."

"Blazepaw! That's my brother Windpaw. That's all the apprentices."

"Wow," I said, half rolling my eyes. "Now I need to remember names all over again."

River Cat Allegiances

Leader: Minkfur - pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Mothtail - brown she-cat with amber eyes

Medicine cat: Daisyleaf - tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow splotches

apprentice, Blazepaw

Warriors: Eveningprimrose - purply she-cat with some lighter areas (Pinkish-white) and blue eyes

apprentice, Windpaw

Tawnyrose - tawny she-cat with some reddish-pink patches

apprentice, Swanflutter

Dawnsight - bright orange she-cat with amber eyes

apprentice, Silverpaw

Meadowstalker - yellow she-cat with green eyes

apprentice, Fluffypaw

Darkmoon - black-and-white tom with pale blue eyes

apprentice, Hiveclaw

Winterice - white-and-gray tom with dark blue eyes

apprentice, Twilightpaw

Bramblefrost - striped brown tom with amber eyes

Leaftail - tortoiseshell tom with amber eyes

Emberblaze - bright orange tom with amber eyes

Apprentices: Blazepaw - orangey-red tom with green eyes

Windpaw - pale gray tom with blue eyes

Silverpaw - silvery she-cat with violet eyes

Fluffypaw - calico she-cat with amber eyes

Twilightpaw - silver she-cat with blue eyes

Hiveclaw - yellow, black and brown tom with green eyes

Swanflutter - white she-cat with blue eyes

QUEENS: Mama Cat - calico she-cat with blue eyes, permanent queen (Like Daisy in the actual series)

Elders: Poppyseed - tortoiseshell she-cat with red patches

Chapter Twenty-two

To be honest, I adjusted to life pretty well here. I liked not having Duckstep as my mentor. It had only been a day, but Duckstep was awful! Dawnsight was a little like Lovegrass, but not so ruthless. She was fierce on the battlefield, but fiercely loyal and protective. Not Lovegrass mean.

I trained with Swanflutter a lot, and they were surprised at how much a match we were. Of course we were. I was even better than her – for StarClan's sake, I trained her!

I could anticipate Swanflutter, but I made my moves go haywire. It was distracting, but so unpredictable that Swanflutter could never catch up. Tawnyrose and Dawnsight would watch in awe, and sometimes Tawnyrose would say that literally all Dawnsight would need to teach me was swimming and catching fish, and I would be done. Swanflutter, too. She wasn't up to my standard – it was funny saying that from an apprentice's point of view – but she was the normal warrior standard.

We went to the river. This was where I struggled. I'd never swam before in my first lifetime, so I had no experience regarding this. Still, the waters were cooling and it felt natural. I was still getting used to the taste of fish, but it grew on me. I'd never forget my favorite thrush, though.

"Into the water," Dawnsight called, and I groaned. "Come on, Silverpaw, you have to learn this," Dawnsight scolded. "There's not much else I can teach you. How old are you again?"

"Six moons and a few days?" I guessed.

"What?" Dawnsight asked. "But you're so good."

"I'm a fast learner," I said defensively, and she purred.

"Well, do that for swimming too!" she said. "I'll need to give you a

swimming assessment, and then you can be a warrior."

Swanflutter overheard this. "Silverpaw just became an apprentice a few days ago."

Dawnsight shrugged. "But there's nothing else she needs to learn."

"You know what I am," I told her. I meant like, a fast learner, and that was what Dawnsight interpreted, but Swanflutter knew I meant that I was Stormdawn and this was perfectly normal.

Unfortunately, Swanflutter almost drowned that day. She hated the water, really hated it, and tried her best to swim but couldn't. I pitied her. The water came naturally to me. I wondered why. I'd hated swimming as Stormdawn, but maybe these were instincts that came from Silverpaw.

"You swim well," Dawnsight commented. "Who are your parents?"

"Frogleap and Coriandermist," I said. I'd almost said Peacewind and Root.

"Oh, that's why," Dawnsight meowed. "Frogleap used to be one of our own, but he fell in love with ... wait... Coriandermist? I thought he loved Ashenface."

"He did," I said. "They had Darkwind, Oakbark and Lilypool together, but then they broke up. Coriandermist and Frogleap and Ashenface are all dead, Ashenface went onto a killing rampage. She killed our former deputy, Stormdawn."

"Oh, I heard about Stormdawn!" Dawnsight meowed brightly. "My mother named me after her, if you'll believe it. Dawn."

Oh, wait, what? Dawnsight? Named after me? Or former me? This was all too confusing! Why would a mother name her daughter after me?

"You look like her," said Dawnsight. "I only caught glimpses of her across the border when I was Dawnpaw, but you two are identical."

"Hey! I'm here to join you for swimming!"

I smiled eagerly as Twilightpaw ran over. The two of us purred and rubbed cheeks for a moment before looking back at Dawnsight. Winterice had followed – he was a white tom who seemed to have no energy.

"You can take over," He meowed tiredly to Dawnsight, then sat down on a tree stump.

Twilightpaw stuck her tongue out, then turned to Dawnsight.

"Just swim, you two," she said.

I swam eagerly. "Race you!" I called to Twilightpaw, because she was a natural at swimming.

"How about I'll beat you!" she grinned, and took up the challenge.

"The ending point is where I'm standing here!" Dawnsight called, and stood quite some distance away.

"Three .... Two.... One.... Go!"

In a flash, we were both swimming. I let out a huff of annoyance as I realized Twilightpaw was further than me. I channeled all my strength into my hind legs and really pushed. I gained on Twilightpaw really fast. She groaned, and tried to swim faster but that was her extent. I smiled as I seemed to glide past her.

I got to Dawnsight first, but Twilightpaw was not far behind me.

"Good game!" she called to me.

"Yeah! You're sure to beat me next time," I called back.

"You bet!"

I grinned. She was amazing, that Twilightpaw.

"You can have the rest of the day off," Dawnsight meowed.

"I'm gonna go pester Winterice, see you later Silverpaw!" Twilightpaw called and left. I grinned. Off to pester Winterice, was

she? I really pitied that cat.

"Done training?" Hiveclaw approached. "Let's go hunting together."

"Sure!" I agreed. "Let's hunt land prey. I'm a bit sick of fish."

"Hey!" Dawnsight called from the riverbank. "Fish is nice!"

I grinned and ran off. Hiveclaw beamed and chased after me, our pawsteps in sync.

We came back with quite a bit of land prey. Minkfur looked at it and sighed.

"Have you two learnt to hunt fishes yet?" she asked softly.

"We needed a change," I said, dropping my rabbit. "I'm a bit sick of fish. It takes some getting used to."

Minkfur laughed. "Yeah, it does. Oh well. Dawnsight said you're ready to become a warrior."

"I am?" I asked, blinking. How long had it been? Two days? Three days? Three days ago I was a kit!

Well, in appearance. I'd always been about forty moons old.

"Okay thanks! Is Hiveclaw becoming a warrior too?" I asked.

Minkfur nodded, then turned to Hiveclaw. "Do you want to change your name now that you're a river cat?"

"Erm ... ok?" asked Hiveclaw. "What will you change it to?"

Minkfur smiled. "Something rivery," she said. "That Twilightpaw is ready too. But Swanflutter and Fluffypaw are having trouble swimming, so they'll have to wait."

I'll be a warrior with Hiveclaw to myself! I thought triumphantly as a sopping wet Fluffypaw entered the camp and shook herself. "Hiveclaw!" she meowed, brightening and ran over, stopping suddenly when she saw who he was with. "Ugh, are you with her

again?" Fluffypaw meowed. "She's too young!" That should have been concern, but it was an insult.

"I'm more skilled than you, mouse-brain," I hissed. "At least I can swim."

Fluffypaw turned beet red. "No!" she said. "I can swim, and I'm more experienced than you!"

"Have you ever fought a fox before?" I taunted, before digesting the meaning of my taunt. I hadn't fought a fox before. Stormdawn had.

"You mean you have?" she smirked.

"If you haven't, not all that experienced, are you?" I demanded. "I never said I'd fought one, but aren't you three moons older than me anyway?"

Fluffypaw glared.

"Called it," I said with a grin.

"No, you didn't call it!" Fluffypaw meowed angrily, but Hiveclaw had brought a rabbit over – my rabbit – and dropped it beside us, motioning for me to share prey with him.

Fluffypaw stared, her eyes round, then they turned misty and she ran.

"Also..." Hiveclaw said, watching as I demolished the rabbit. He snuck a few bites in. "Are you actually with... you know ... him? He didn't follow."

"With who?" I asked, frowning.

"They were lies," muttered Hiveclaw. "Um," he added, "Nightpaw. Fluffypaw's brother. He likes you."

I blinked. "Maybe he does," I said, "but I like you."

Hiveclaw purred. "Me too! We can be mates when you ... wait, hang on ... aren't you a brand-new apprentice? Like, three days ago? Why

are you a warrior already?"

"We might wait a while to be mates," I told him, grinning. "I'm literally too young."

Hiveclaw smiled, and in that moment, all was peaceful, and I closed my eyes dreamily, wishing nothing would ever happen, that we'd never be separated, and this would last forever.

Chapter Twenty-three

I became Silverdusk, as I'd been told. Twilightpaw had become Twilightgleam. I liked her name. It was pretty. Hiveclaw had been named ... Hiveclaw, because thought Minkfur had promised him a rivery name, she hadn't managed to think of one herself that sounded quite so good. She'd asked him if he wanted to be named Hivegleam, and he was like, 'that's a girl's name!'.

Apparently he thought gleam was a girl's ending.

Twilightgleam wished I'd been named Silvergleam, but I'd known my name a long time ago.

"Sorry, couldn't you have been Twilightdusk?" I asked.

Twilightgleam shook her head. "Those are two different times of the day! It would sound okay, but mean weird stuff."

I grinned at her. 'Weird stuff'. Only my best friend Twilightgleam could ever say that. Most people were more mature, and would say, 'strange matters', myself included.

I watched Swanflutter and Fluffypaw. Fluffypaw was staring at me enviously, but Swanflutter's gaze was one full of love and sorrow and ... was that worry? Was my former apprentice literally staring at me with worry clouding her gaze? I had to go speak to that cat! She needed to have more faith in me.

Swanflutter blinked as I approached.

"Stormsilver!" She gasped, then frowned. "Wait, that was wrong. My mind was elsewhere. Sorry. You look just like her." That was a cover up, because Fluffypaw was looking confused and suspicious now. "Silverdusk. Congratulations."

"You're still a kit!" Fluffypaw sneered.

"I can swim," I jeered.

Swanflutter flinched, but I ignored her for once. I loved Swanflutter, really loved her, but she was too jumpy. Fluffypaw looked undeterred.

"I too can swim," she announced boldly.

"Who failed her swimming test?" I asked idly. "I believe it was you."

Again, Swanflutter flinched. Oh, come on. She was that jittery? She had promised to be my mother, and I had promised to be hers, but I was definitely the mother around here. Swanflutter ... no. Not a mother.

Fluffypaw glared. "I was supposed to be named Fluffyfrost!"

"Frost is fluffy?" I asked with a snort.

"Dusk is silver?" Fluffypaw challenged, then realized.

"Well, grayish," I said. "That's practically silver."

Fluffypaw shrugged. "Well now! Whatevs. Anyway, Wheats don't have pelts, so a lot of names are jumbled. I know Eveningprimrose is a flower, but roses aren't tawny. As for my mentor..." She shook her head, almost disbelievingly. "Meadowstalker! What name is that?"

"The name of the cat standing in front of you?" Indeed, Meadowstalker, Fluffypaw's mentor, had been standing behind me, idly watching our conversation and taking in Fluffypaw's insults.

"We don't live on the meadow!" Fluffypaw demanded.

Meadowstalker smiled. "Would you by any chance know I am your aunt?"

"What?" asked Fluffypaw.

"Aunt," said Meadowstalker. "Wheatpelt and I are sisters. Oh, seriously. I was named Meadowkit because Flametail loves the meadow and so does Stargleam. Wheat grows there. Whitewhisker was just white. We got our names." She smiled slyly down at

Fluffypaw. "Did you by any chance know you were named by the deputy?"

"Goldenwind?" came Fluffypaw's response. Then she sighed. "Oh, Stormdawn. I loved her. Adored her. Then she stopped coming."

Really? Loved me? Adored me? Fluffypaw hated me. Or, this me. But I hadn't changed much since I was Stormdawn, only I'd fallen in love with Hiveclaw and become younger than most cats I had been superior to. That had been annoying, and still was.

Meadowstalker nodded sympathetically, then turned to me. "Oh, by the way, Silverdusk, you will be sitting vigil with Twilightgleam only. Hiveclaw is already a warrior."

"Oh," I said. Well, who cared, I had Twilightgleam! Wait, we couldn't talk. I remembered that now. I always talked to Twilightgleam. Always.

Meadowstalker smiled at me, then turned a hard frown on Fluffypaw. "You insulted me. I'm not going to pretend I'm hurt, because I'm not, honestly. Wheatpelt and I hated each other. But, Winterice was perfect. We came together."

"The cat with no energy," I added before I could stop myself.

Meadowstalker laughed. "He doesn't have much energy for young cats, but you should have seen him with Eveningprimrose when she was a kit. Hardly left her side and he was always playing with her. Cats thought he was finally gaining energy, but he's only like that with our daughter."

"Eveningprimrose is my cousin?" Fluffypaw asked, disgusted. Why would she be disgusted? Eveningprimrose was a nice cat, and was even training Windpaw. Blazepaw had turned out to be the medicine cat apprentice.

"Yes," Meadowstalker meowed.

"She's far more pleasant than you," I put in.

Meadowstalker beamed at me. "I like you, Silverdusk," she said.

"Got some snark. No one else does."

I grinned back, then turned back to Twilightgleam.

"Vigil!" the silver she-cat said dramatically with a grimace. Her blue eyes locked with mine. "No talking," she finished melodramatically in a whisper.

"So dramatic," I mumbled.

Twilightgleam grinned, and spoke in an overdramatic voice (yes I like these dramatics). "Oh my StarClan Silverdusk! No talking! How am I to live!"

"One night." Meadowstalker rolled her eyes and walked off. "Fluffypaw, dawn tomorrow," she called over her shoulder, smiling slightly at the fluffy younger she-cat. Wait, not younger – I was six moons and three or four days – I meant, older she-cat. Older than me at least. The Silverdusk me.

"See you in the morning," Hiveclaw meowed, his way of bidding me goodbye. I licked his ears in goodbye and he sighed. "I just got these dry, you know," he said, shaking himself. It didn't do much good – my licks were like, dry kind of wet, and he couldn't shake the moisture off. "I'm going to sleep with wet ears. Again. Fluffypaw did them yesterday, and now you're doing them." Hiveclaw sighed overdramatically, just like Twilightgleam did. "But at least you're nicer," he finished with a sly grin, and I couldn't help but beam back.

"I'm in for a quiet night," I grimaced. "Don't say anything to me before dawn."

Hiveclaw nodded in agreement with another grin, then left. Fluffypaw trailed after him and then Blazepaw scolded her for not going to the apprentices' den. Fluffypaw looked at Hiveclaw and the warriors' den with longing, then at Twilightgleam with longing, and then at me with pure hatred.

"Hate me all you want, Fluffypaw," I whispered to her, a challenge.

"I will," she mumbled back.

~

I remembered my first vigil, when I'd fallen asleep. Cloudysky had spotted me then. I'd almost come to love him that very moment, with his jokes and easygoing nature. But I realized, the thing about toms. The moment you died or rejected them, they didn't try harder, they moved on. Duskypelt with Plumwhisker and Cloudysky with Leafshine. Both had moved on almost immediately after I'd rejected them. I could see, back when I'd lived in the forest normally, that Leafshine had always cherished Cloudysky, but never got the chance.

In the morning, Minkfur announced we were meeting with Icestar for a weird daylight gathering thingy. I yawned, and stretched. Twilightgleam had kept me awake, almost continuously bouncing.

We got there and I saw Cloudysky scolding Leafshine inaudibly. She was heavy with kits – hadn't I only left two days ago? She must have already been expecting. Why was she here? Duskypelt was there too, with a sorrowful-looking Plumwhisker, but she always looked sad, since they'd lost their kits.

"Unfortunately, Lightmist died yesterday," Icestar meowed. "It was her last wish that Tawnypaw be made an apprentice, so we apprenticed her early. Her mentor is one of our new warriors, Nightwish. He and his sister Skystrike were made warriors yesterday. Also, Dawnpaw and Chivepaw have become Dawnmist and Chiveleaf."

Minkfur stepped forward. "I too have new warriors. Dawnmist and Chiveleaf's sister, Twilightgleam!"

"Our sister too!" Nightwish called. Skystrike nodded in agreement, and they frowned when Fluffypaw hung her head.

"No, Fluffypaw unfortunately couldn't swim," Minkfur meowed sadly. "Fluffypaw remains an apprentice. Silverpaw has become Silverdusk. I know she was a brand new apprentice, but Silverdusk is so accomplished there is nothing more to teach her. We also welcomed Hiveclaw as a full river cat. Swanflutter and Fluffypaw still need to learn how to swim."

"I have new kits expected," Icestar meowed happily. "First of all, Leafshine is almost ready to give birth to Cloudysky's kits. She's here, though um..." Emuwing shot Leafshine an angry glare, and Cocoaleaf shot Cloudysky an equally angry one. Iceflight, Songbird and Honeypaw looked angry too. They were all there. "Also, Fallowmist is expecting Stripetail's kits. Honeypaw has also become Honeybee."

"Honeybee! Honeybee!"

Honeybee ran forward to embrace Hiveclaw. "Oh, my brother!" she cried.

"Honeyp – bee!" Hiveclaw amended.

Honeybee beamed. "And you have a MATE!" she cried joyfully.

All eyes turned to Hiveclaw and Honeybee.

"You do," said Honeybee. "That Silverdusk."

"Um, Honeybee?" Hiveclaw asked. "Everyone is looking."

Laughter erupted from the cats everywhere. Minkfur was barely holding her sides.

"Also," Icestar meowed. "I wasn't finished you know. Wheatpelt has moved to the nursery carrying ... um ... Eagletail's second litter."

"What?" I demanded. But I'd seen him with Kyla! They had two litters! Did that mean he'd cheated on Wheatpelt for Kyla, and now he was cheating on Kyla for Wheatpelt? That Eagletail was a confusing cat!

"Um ... we're not sure," Icestar meowed. "She left heavy hints they were Eagletail's, though ... er ... she's been rather close with Wormtail recently."

Wormtail, who was literally there, smiled. "Yes, they're mine," he said, with a smile. A weird smile. I hardly even remembered Wormtail in SeasonClan, even as Stormdawn. Even characters like Frogleap and Coriandermist and Ashenface had been pulled out by

random, even though I'd written them in the allegiances. They were, like, RANDOM CATS.

(Blah blah. The 'blah blah' is in place of Wormtail ranting about how good he is.)

Wormtail closed his mouth as he finished speaking, after saying he was a great, great tom, was destined to be deputy during Goldenwind's reign, because he was her brother.

Wormtail's former mate, Riversong,just stared blankly. Surprisingly, she leaned over to me.

"Do you know why I left that tom?" the old she-cat rasped.

"Um ... no," I replied.

Riversong gave a short bark-like laugh. "His ego!" she said.

I couldn't help but laugh too. Understandable. His ego was ... a lot? So full of himself. So proud.

"Are the river cats expecting new kits from you this new season?" Riversong asked.

"What?" I could feel my pelt burning.

"You and him." Riversong pointed at Hiveclaw. "I can't figure that tom out, though. Is he with you or Fluffypaw?"

"He's with me," I said. "At least I think so. But Fluffypaw likes him."

"Aah. Explains a lot." Riversong sighed. I could understand her confusion. Even right now, while I spoke to her, Fluffypaw was next to Hiveclaw, trying to engage him in a conversation.

"And now our cats can talk for a while," Icestar meowed. "Some of them already seem to be doing that." She gave a pointed glance to me and Riversong.

I looked around the gathered cats for Appledawn, and I spotted her and Browntail.

"Appledawn!" I cried, running over. Twilightgleam followed, eager as me to see her mother.

Appledawn stopped looking at Icestar and ran over to the two of us. Browntail joined, but he was more with Twilightgleam than me, while Appledawn lovingly licked us equally.

"How's life there?" Appledawn asked kindly.

"Fun!" Twilightgleam answered immediately. "I swim now!"

"Oh, uh," said Browntail, "That's great." He looked a little disgusted. "You eat ... fish?" he asked.

Appledawn elbowed him. "Quit asking weird questions!" she snorted. "Are they treating you well?" she asked softly, turning to us.

I nodded. Twilightgleam nodded too, but she was bouncing.

"My mentor was nice," Twilightgleam meowed. "I mean, he was Winterice with about no energy, but he was still nice. My favorite non-SeasonClan-former-cat there is Eveningprimrose. She's fun."

"Name's a mouthful," Appledawn commented. Twilightgleam nodded immediately.

I watched, almost ruefully, as Twilightgleam energetically conversed with her parents. Eventually, I turned away from lack of interest. I couldn't really explain the happiness I'd felt at seeing Appledawn, but the original gusto I'd had was gone now, the way I saw that I didn't fit in with her family. Twilightgleam, Dawnmist and Chiveleaf were all energetic and bubbly cats like their mother, and Browntail did try to be like them, but me. I was quiet at times, bubbly at others, but Twilightgleam seemed to be bubbly and fun all day long, twenty-four seven three sixty-five.

I wondered, trying to remember. Who were my old friends as Stormdawn? Had I even had old friends? Oh ... right. Either the toms, Glitterpaw – or ... wait ... Glitterpaw? Why wasn't she a warrior yet? I approached Emuwing, my former best friend. She was staring off into the sky.

She jumped. "Oh, sorry, Silverdusk!" she gasped. "I was distracted."

"By what?" I asked.

"I was trying to glimpse Silverpelt. That was stupid, it's morning. I ... just ... I haven't ever seen my best friend in StarClan." Emuwing frowned at the sky. "One of those stars I can't see is her, I'm sure. But ... I haven't seen her at all. What if she went to the Dark Forest? I can't even think of what she might've done wrong. She was perfect." The way Emuwing gushed about me, it was heartwarming.

"She's probably up there," I said. "Or maybe she's down here. Watching you from afar. Reincarnated, even."

Emuwing gave me a deathstare, than laughed. "Silverdusk, you're leaving too heavy hints. I can tell you're Stormdawn. Deep down."

I caught a flash of yellowish-brown fur in the bush next to us. I jumped, almost unsheathed my claws. "Who's there?" I demanded.

Who did I know that had yellow, brown and black fur?

Hiveclaw. He stepped out then.

"You mean," he said, shaking, "The cat I fell in love with – Silverdusk – she's fake? You're Stormdawn? When did you take over her?"

I sighed. "Hiveclaw, I've been Stormdawn since the moment I was a kit, and opened my eyes."

Hiveclaw's eyes widened. "So you aren't a fake. I legit fell in love with Stormdawn."

"Kind of," I said, shrugging. "is that a problem?"

"If you're Stormdawn," he said, "you're way, way older than me."

"In mind, I am," I said. "In body, I'm not. And ... really. If you dump me now, Hiveclaw, I'll understand. I mean, I dumped two toms on my own, chose one, and he dumped me. So, I'm really used to dumping and being dumped."

Yup. I saw it in his eyes. Shock. Almost fury. It was true, though. I'd dumped Duskypelt and Cloudysky, and then I'd chosen Zealheart and he'd dumped me for his childhood crush Glitterpaw.

"Thinking about that," I said, turning to Emuwing. "Why is she still Glitterpaw? She's my old age."

"She's an incompetent fool, that's why," Emuwing sighed. "Seriously. You'd think she could catch a rabbit by now. Silkpelt dropped her a long time ago. After two moons and no progress, Sillkpelt swapped out. She engaged one of the new warriors – I can't remember which one. I remember Fallowmist was training Glitterpaw. But she dropped her too. I think the new cat is Appledawn, who is obviously going to drop her. At this rate, we're going to have to ask Zealheart to train her." Emuwing shook her head sadly. "You'd think Stormdawn's sister would be better than that."

I nodded, sighing. My sister. She'd called it Stormdawn's because I was Silverdusk, but in reality Glitterpaw was my sister.

After the gathering, I went to Twolegplace to see Hazelshade and Littlecloud, and I was already there before I remembered they were in SeasonClan now. I was about to turn back when somebody called me.

I whipped around. A black tom was sitting on the fence. He had spiky fur.

"Hey," he said. "Are you one of those wildcats?"

"Yes," I said nervously.

"I used to know one!" the tom exclaimed brightly. "We were seeing each other, but many moons ago, she stopped coming. I don't venture in the forest. Would you by any chance know her? Her name is Lovegrass."

LOVEGRASS? I vaguely remembered her falling in love with a kittypet. Even to Stormdawn, that was a long time ago. What was his name ... uh.... Um..... oh right! Spiky!

"You're Spiky?" I demanded.

Spiky nodded eagerly. "Yeah! Did she tell you about me? What happened to her?"

"Greencough took her," I said. "She hunts with StarClan now. Great StarClan, Spiky, she died so long ago, and Littlecloud was here, you should have asked him!"

"Little Clouds?" Spiky asked. "Was he a former warrior? And Hazelly Shade too?"

I nodded numbly. So, everyone had called them by that? Little Clouds and Hazelly Shade? Delightful.

By the way, that was sarcastic.

"Yeah," I said. "Lovegrass is dead. Have fun."

"Fun?" he demanded. "I mean, there was a possibility she died. She used to come every other night, and then for ... moons and moons on end, she never came. But... I thought maybe she'd given birth to my kits. I'd hoped. And she was weak from the kitting."

"You never came to see her," I said, rolling my eyes. "And you made assumptions. Great."

Spiky looked embarrassed. "Well, uh, cos I started seeing another cat."

"Her name?"

"She's a warrior too," he said. "her name is Plumwhisker."

~

What? Plumwhisker? Cheating on Duskypelt? "Okay thanks bye," I said hurriedly and ran off.

That night, I came back, and low and behold, Plumwhisker turned up.

"Spiky!" she cried, and ran up to him.

And ... behind her, Duskypelt. Watched.

He saw me.

"Silverdusk," he said. "What brings you here?" his voice was quiet.

"Your mate cheating on you?" I asked.

"Yeah," he breathed. "This is the second time I'm dumped. And to think ... I don't even think those kits Plumwhisker bore were mine. They looked like him. One was gray, but Plumwhisker is gray."

"Spiky loved Lovegrass, you know," I said. "Plumwhisker is a change. I don't know exactly how old that Plumwhisker is, but she's younger than Lovegrass." Slightly more hesitantly and hoping it wouldn't be a giveaway, I added, "Younger than that deputy of yours too? The former one?"

Duskypelt flinched. "You brought up her," he mumbled. "I've been trying to forget her, but I can't. Even after Plumwhisker, now she's cheating on me. Stormdawn never loved me. But she never faked love and then betrayed me. I respect her for that. She knew she couldn't love me, so she didn't fake it." There was mutual respect glimmering in Duskypelt's eyes. That was it, then. He still loved me.

"Is Cloudysky feeling the same way? He loved her too, I heard," I said.

Duskypelt shrugged. "Leafshine truly loves him, and the kits are his. Cloudysky's getting on fine. And Zealheart dumped her when she chose him. Stupid of her, choosing an outsider. Maybe she didn't like the way we padded after her." Duskypelt shook his head. "Still, I'm glad Cloudysky moved on. He's my brother too, and Leafshine has loved him for ages, since he was Cloudypaw, apparently."

Leafshine had loved him for that long? And she'd watched him fall in love with me and pad after me? I felt my heart breaking for that poor she-cat.

Duskypelt seemed to have forgotten me, and moved into the light.

Plumwhisker gasped. "Duskypelt!" She looked bashful, embarrassed.

"Did ... you hear..."

"Everything," Duskypelt finished with a sigh. There was an awkward silence.

"I'm so sorry." Plumwhisker's voice dropped. "I could have loved you. I was ... seeing both of you. But I loved Spiky more. But by then we were mates when I decided, and ... it would've broken you. I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"Kind of used to it by now," Duskypelt meowed. "Those two. Stripedkit and Duskkit. They weren't mine, were they?"

Slowly, Plumwhisker shook her head. "I'm so sorry," she said again.

"It's fine." His emotions were obvious though. His eyes were misty. "We weren't meant for each other, were we, Plummy?" he asked sadly. He was using a weird kittypet name.

What kind of name is Plummy? I wondered, but then, hey, some of these CloudClan cats had to be former kittypets, weren't they? Plumwhisker must be a former kittypet who'd curiously joined Lightcry as they left their river, only to regret it later.

Plumwhisker shook her head sadly. "I'm also going back to Twolegs. Spiky's," she said. "Maybe the life of a warrior isn't for me. I followed Lightcry because she was my best friend, and I did like Willowstreak. But he died on the journey." Plumwhisker sighed. "I thought I was following them because Willowstreak would've wanted me to. But no. I suppose I ended up with Twolegs again." She stared directly at Spiky, and literally said it right in front of Duskypelt: "I could never forget Willowstreak, but I love you."

Author's Note

SEEE??? I told you I would include Spiky later! I sincerely hope none of you forgot him. (When I say none of you, I just mean, well, YOU, because only one person is reading this)

Chapter Twenty-four

I left after that. I didn't hear Duskypelt's horrified cry, although he was sure to have known it was coming. Slowly padding back to camp, I had to think of a reason why I'd been out. Then, as I got back in, I suddenly remembered I wasn't an apprentice anymore. I didn't need to explain myself. Content, I washed myself in the river – or rather, swam in the river – and got out, shaking.

It wasn't that late. Maybe only sundown. Minkfur immediately sent me on a hunting patrol. I really wondered what Minkfur's deputy, Mothtail, did, because Minkfur did everything.

I went to find Twilightgleam, and she was talking animatedly to Emberblaze. I remembered him from my few days here. Emberblaze was a grumpy tom, and hardly ever smiled. But he was smiling now, at her, as she rattled on about whatever she thought about.

"Twilightgleam!" I called, and the smile vanished off his face. "Do you want to go hunting with me?"

"Okay!" Twilightgleam broke apart from Emberblaze and ran over. "Seriously, Silverdusk? I just got him to smile!"

"Oh well," I said with a sigh. "Anyone you want?"

"I'll invite Winterice," she said.

"I'll invite Dawnmist, I guess," I said.

Shortly, me, Twilightgleam, Winterice and Dawnmist all came on the hunting patrol. Somehow Winterice managed to convince us to let Meadowstalker and Eveningprimrose join, and he was actually animated in whatever conversations went on as we set out. Eveningprimrose was literally beaming at her father – who beamed at Winterice? Only her, and Meadowstalker.

As we gathered our prey to go back, Meadowstalker leaned over to

me. "How's Wheatpelt?" Meadowstalker asked. "I haven't seen her at a gathering in ages."

"To be fair," I said, "there hasn't been a gathering in ages."

Meadowstalker laughed. "Yeah, that's true. SeasonClan's former deputy, Stormdawn, lived and died and there was no gathering!" She chuckled. "But, last time I saw her, she was devastated by Whitewhisker's death. How is she now?"

"If you'll forgive me for saying so," I said, "she's a boring, depressed cat. I mean, her mate abandoned her. But I guess she's with Wormtail now, right? She used to be with Eagletail."

"Oh, him," said Meadowstalker. "She liked him, actually. Don't think he liked her, though."

I nodded. I couldn't explain too much. After all, I was only six moons and a few days old. My name was Silverdusk, not Stormdawn. I wouldn't know these things.

We dropped our catches in the fresh-kill pile and I took a rabbit to share with Hiveclaw, but he was sharing with Darkmoon, his former mentor. He gave me an awkward smile and returned to his prey.

I ate the rabbit by myself, straining to hear Hiveclaw and Darkmoon's conversation. My ability to hear further had been dampened when I'd become Silverdusk, and it was very annoying.

"... What are you going to do about that she-cat?" Darkmoon was asking.

"What about Silverdusk?" Hiveclaw asked, stiffening.

"You're avoiding her," Darkmoon said, rolling his eyes. "Since the gathering. Something went on there? She liked you."

"I know she liked me," Hiveclaw said uncomfortably.

"And now, you're ditching her." Darkmoon continued with his eyerolling. "that's very nice of you, Hiveclaw."

"I don't know what to do," Hiveclaw allowed himself a shuddering sigh. "I found out something about her this morning that I didn't need to know."

"I'm not going to ask you what that is," Darkmoon said, "but whatever that thing is, she's not affected. Why are you?"

"Because that was her secret, finally spilled," said Hiveclaw. "I don't even know if I should be with her anymore. We talked a lot, so much even, and she never thought to tell me?"

"She would've probably told you when you were mates," Darkmoon soothed. "After all, you said it was her secret."

Hiveclaw merely sighed again, finishing the thrush they were sharing in a few rapid bites and then staring dejectedly at the ground.

"Her ears are twitching," Darkmoon said suddenly. "Any chance she just heard all of this?"

I didn't express my shock, but I immediately stopped listening to their conversation.

But I couldn't help but do it for a few more seconds.

"She stopped," he said. "The ear twitching stopped when I said that. She was listening, Hiveclaw."

I saw it in his face. His eyes turned panicky.

Then I stopped listening for real and demolished my rabbit, burying the bones in the ground and turning to walk away.

"Stop."

Darkmoon's quiet voice, quiet but commanding, succeeded in stopping me.

"Silverdusk," Darkmoon said, "what did you hear?"

"What did I hear?" I asked flatly. "Let's say, everything. Also, I don't

care if Hiveclaw is dumping me. I'm used to it." I knew it. My voice had the slightest slimmer of hurt in it as I turned and stalked away.

I hid behind the warriors' den and heard them talking again.

"She's hurt, Hiveclaw," Darkmoon was saying. "Don't worry, there's no way she can hear us from here. She's hurt. She puts on a brave front, but she's hurt."

"Silverdusk," Hiveclaw sighed. "She's tough. I love her for that."

"You still do," Darkmoon said, easily pointing out that he hadn't used past tense.

"Of course I do," Hiveclaw sighed again. "It's just so weird now. Her and me."

Darkmoon sighed. "I don't have much experience in these matters because I never told my love that I loved her. She died too soon for that."

"I'm sorry," Hiveclaw meowed, looking stunned.

"Her name was Whitewhisker," Darkmoon sighed. "We met on a border patrol, and we started talking. Then a fox got her a few days later."

Whitewhisker, I thought. He fell in love with Wheatpelt and Meadowstalker's sister.

I snuck into the warriors' den and curled up to sleep. I was the first there, as it was only moonrise, but... I was tired. I saw Hiveclaw's nest next to mine, but I wondered if he'd move it.

I fell asleep before I could know.

~

I woke up in the morning and Hiveclaw's nest was empty, but it was warm. He had been here, but left on the dawn patrol or something.

"You are an early sleeper and a late riser, Silverdusk," Dawnmist

purred. "That's not a good combo!"

I laughed. "I guess not. But I didn't sleep last night."

"Oh yeah," said Dawnmist, as if only suddenly remembering my warriors' vigil.

Twilightgleam was already outside. She was talking to Emberblaze again.

Mothtail – yes, finally Mothtail – assigned me to a border patrol led by Eveningprimrose. Emberblaze and Twilightgleam were both going.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see much about their relationship because Emberblaze shied away the moment he saw I was there too. Windpaw had come along since he was Eveningprimrose's apprentice, and he was teasing Emberblaze.

"Come on, Dad!" he was saying.

Twilightgleam froze. "Did he say ... Dad?"

"Yes," I said, freezing as well. "He did."

Eveningprimrose turned back. "Um, guys? You do know Windpaw is the son of Emberblaze and Mothtail, right?"

"He has a MATE?" Twilightgleam asked.

Eveningprimrose rolled her eyes. "I know. Hard to believe. But yes, he does. And he's only been talking to you because he's trying not to hurt your feelings."

Emberblaze rolled his eyes, cuffed Windpaw's ear and continued walking. He nodded slightly sheepishly to Twilightgleam, who was staring with a hurt expression.

"Sorry," he said, "if you got your hopes up. But ... well, Mothtail's ..."

"Amazing?" Windpaw asked. "She's deputy."

"Erm ... yeah," said Emberblaze. "Totally wow yeah."

Twilightgleam rolled her eyes, her hurt now disguised, and stalked off. She didn't need to play Emberblaze's games anymore, I figured. She'd need some cheering up later, but Twilightgleam did need time to herself, no matter how extroverted she seemed.

We continued walking, though considerably quieter.

We got back to camp just in time for the evening meal. Twilightgleam avoided everyone and ate by herself. I spotted Hiveclaw with Darkmoon, again, and went behind the warriors' den to listen.

"I ... just ... what can I say anymore?" Hiveclaw asked.

"Why," said Darkmoon, "are you talking to me about this, again?"

"Help," was all Hiveclaw got out.

I could hear Darkmoon sighing. "Well," he said, "if you still love her, tell her!"

Hiveclaw shook his head. "It's not that easy, Darkmoon! Our situation is awkward now."

"Only because you make it that way," Darkmoon allowed another sigh. "Hiveclaw, I can tell when a cat is in love. Silverdusk is. But you ... are you going to leave her? The way Silverdusk spoke. She's been dumped before."

"She has," Hiveclaw agreed. "Just ... not in this lifetime."

Finally, Darkmoon's jaw dropped. I was watching him through the warriors' den and I saw the shock finally reach him.

"Reincarnation," Darkmoon finally said. "Who is Silverdusk?"

"She is Stormdawn," Hiveclaw said with a sigh. "I vaguely remember her. But that's the point. As deputy, she visited me as a kit. She knew me then, and I know her now, it's different. She's reliving her same old life now."

"She isn't," said Darkmoon. "She really isn't. She didn't live with the river cats in her last life. She is living something new. She has new friends."

"Her old friends are still around," said Hiveclaw. "Emuwing, for one."

Darkmoon sighed. "It's awkward. But ... I heard rumors about Stormdawn."

"What?" Hiveclaw's ears perked.

"That she could hear from far away, see from far away," explained Darkmoon. "But that means..."

"Is she listening ... now?" asked Hiveclaw. "Where is she?"

I stopped listening immediately and snuck into the den to sleep. I heard Hiveclaw and Darkmoon enter, and then Hiveclaw whispered, "Great StarClan, thank goodness. She's sleeping."

"Although," said Darkmoon, his brow furrowing, "Silverdusk was sleeping the last time we talked, too. And she's breathing rather quickly." I looked through my closed eyelids and saw he was smiling. "Silverdusk, you aren't asleep, are you?"

Finally, I stood up and shook myself. "Fine, I'm not," I said.

"You heard everything ... again?" Hiveclaw asked.

I smiled serenely at him. "I've told you before, Hiveclaw. Love me if you want, dump me if you want. The crushing sense of rejection isn't new."

Hiveclaw frowned. "You did say that. But ... you also said you loved me."

"Love," I corrected. "I do. But I respect your thoughts. If you're uncomfortable mating with Stormdawn, let me make it clear, I am Silverdusk's age. If not that, but my years of experience that bother you, fine. Dump me. I told you. It's not new."

I got up, waiting for him to nod, and apologetically dump me. It really, really wasn't new, but it was sad all the same. He was a lovable tom, and if not me, Fluffypaw.

Speaking of which... I hadn't seen her all day.

"HEY HIVECLAW!"

Hiveclaw pulled away from me and stepped outside. I watched and listened.

"I'm gonna be a WARRIOR!" Fluffypaw was yelling. "And so is Swanflutter! We're going to be real WARRIORS, HIVECLAW! We can share a den, finally," she said dreamily.

"Um ... WHAT" said Hiveclaw.

"Come on," said Fluffypaw. "You're ignoring Silverdusk now. Have you finally noticed me?"

"Actually, I have," said Hiveclaw, "because you are so annoying."

"I want to cry," said Fluffypaw.

"Cry."

I said that. Really. It was me.

Fluffypaw turned.

"You want to cry, then cry," I said harshly.

Fluffypaw did look teary-eyed. "He rejected me," she whimpered, almost moving closer to me. "Because he loves you."

"He rejected me too," I said. "Get a life, Fluffypaw."

Chapter Twenty-five

"You – you too?" Fluffypaw blinked rapidly, uncomprehending. "Really?"

"I didn't!" Hiveclaw stepped between us.

"Didn't you?" I cocked my eyebrows. "Sent a message, 'way you talked to Darkmoon, eh?"

"Silverdusk..." Hiveclaw meowed, almost sadly. "You know it's ... weird. Awkward."

"I know it," I said. "It isn't stopping me."

"It was your secret!" Hiveclaw protested. "For you, it's different."

"Is it," I said. "Okay."

I turned to walk away. I didn't expect him to call after me, but he did, and I didn't respond. I stopped in my tracks, frozen dead, but didn't turn back. Until I saw yellowish fangs bared at me.

A fox. Finally, after all my ranting to Fluffypaw, it was finally a fox. I wanst disappointed, exactly, but Hiveclaw had already turned away. I thought about the ancient Froststar. She had been a deadly cat. Could I be like her? Kill that fox without caring?

The truth was, I could. I didn't care much about that fox's life.

I attacked it head-on. The fox bared yellowish fangs and attacked at once. I didn't screech, not even as it raked its claws across my side. Could I die again? I could. I didn't know why StarClan had reincarnated me in Silverdusk because life wasn't worth it. Nothing had changed! I had been dumped again. Again. I said it didn't hurt, but it did, and I meant it.

My Clanmates jumped in to tackle the fox. I took a step back and watched as Hiveclaw and Fluffypaw dove in to the fight, side-by-

side. Great StarClan, they were in sync.

Leap and slash, leap and slash, leap and slash. To think he said she was annoying. They were together in that one final moment. It wasn't me and him, it was her and him.

And then Fluffypaw jumped out of the fight to aid Darkmoon to help him to the medicine den. And my Clanmates seemed to fall back, and Hiveclaw was alone.

At that moment, I knew I couldn't die. He'd ditched me, but I loved him far too much to do that.

I jumped in, knocked Hiveclaw out of the way and took the fox's attack straight in the chest.

I didn't see anything after that.

~

"She can't die now, Daisyleaf! She gave up her life for mine. That wasn't right."

"That's the Clanmate's way, Hiveclaw. Silverdusk swore to do this."

"Daisyleaf, she's hardly more than a kit. She's six moons old!"

"Hiveclaw. Please get out. Blazepaw and I need to work."

"Daisyleaf..."

"Hiveclaw!"

"Okay, okay!"

"You should congratulate Fluffytail. She's been staring at you."

"I don't like her, Daisyleaf."

"Hiveclaw..."

"Seriously, Daisyleaf."

"Okay..."

"Thank you."

I heard Hiveclaw exiting, and almost sighed. I could feel someone pressing cobwebs onto my chest. Breathing was slightly painful but bearable. I blinked open my eyes, if only to allow Daisyleaf some relief. But the one putting cobwebs on me wasn't Daisyleaf, it was Blazepaw.

"Hey, she's awake!" Blazepaw exclaimed.

"Oh!" Daisyleaf ran over. "How are you?" she asked. "Fox got you in the chest. Are you stupid? You dove straight into its attack."

"I am stupid," I said. "Stupidly loyal. It was going to kill Hiveclaw."

Daisyleaf sighed. "You're reckless."

"I am," I said, acknowledging the fact.

"He's worried sick, anyway," Daisyleaf meowed. "Said it's his fault."

"It's not," I said. "It's my stupid loyalty's fault."

Daisyleaf smiled. "Ok. How's your breathing?"

"Painful," I said with a grimace. "But bearable."

"If you can breathe and talk, it missed your windpipe," said Daisyleaf. "That's very, very good news."

I hoped that meant good stuff. I mean, if she said it was good news, it should be good. But one can never be sure.

Daisyleaf was smiling and so was Blazepaw. That was good, I supposed. Both smiling! Yes. Very, very good.

I strained my ears.

"Congrats ... Fluffytail," I heard Hiveclaw saying awkwardly near the warriors' den.

"Oh, thank you!" said Fluffyp – tail. "If you don't mind, we could shift over Silverdusk's nest since she's injured. I'll sleep here."

"I'm a bit uncomfortable with that," stuttered Hiveclaw.

"You'll get used to it." Fluffytail was grinning.

"I like ... personal space," meowed Hiveclaw.

"Not from her, so why from me?" Fluffytail asked.

"Silverdusk."

I stopped staring out and hearing out. "Yeah, Daisyleaf?" I asked.

"Rest," she said. "Stop straining your ears and your eyes to do whatever you're doing."

"Oh." Was it that obvious? "Okay."

Daisyleaf sniffed me for a moment, then said, "Good to go, but don't go on any patrols. Just slow walking, got it?"

"Okay," I said, with an eyeroll, and went outside.

Mothtail immediately greeted me. "Would you like to lead a hunting patrol?"

I shook my head. "Daisyleaf said slow walking only."

"Poor thing," the deputy crooned.

After that, she proceeded to send Hiveclaw on a hunting patrol that was led by Fluffytail. Poor Hiveclaw. He didn't even see me up and about before he left, Fluffytail practically dragging him.

"Silverdusk! You're okay!"

That was Swanflutter. She ran over, smiling. "Thank goodness!" she exclaimed in a very motherly way, but also in a former apprentice way.

"I am."

Swanflutter beamed and nuzzled me. "I'm so glad," she whispered – were those tears falling from her eyes? "I thought I'd lost you again."

I nuzzled her back, my eyes closing. "Who drove away the fox?" I asked quietly.

"It was Hiveclaw," Swanflutter meowed, shaking. "He was furious. His eyes were so dark, Silverdusk. He didn't drive the fox away, he killed it. He ignored Mothtail telling him to stand down. He was so .... Angry."

Wow. Hiveclaw was mad. He thought I'd died, and he was mad about it. Killed a fox for it.

He did love me. Despite our differences, despite the 'former lifetime' situation, he really loved me.

I could only smile.

~ Two moons later ~

"You are actually ready," I said, almost flatly.

"I'm ready," Hiveclaw answered.

I stared back. "You are going to propose to me, you're nervous, and you're confiding in me."

"Yes," said Hiveclaw.

"That same cat you are going to propose to."

"... yes."

I laughed. That was actually funny. He wanted me to be his mate, was nervous, and had confided in me. That was downright ridiculous, and yet, completely Hiveclaw.

"There's another gathering soon," he said, changing the subject, twining his tail with mine.

"So, without proposing, we are officially mates?" I asked. He nodded with a grin. "Okay. Wait, what? Gathering again? So soon? Last time, there was a what – sixty moon gap?"

Hiveclaw grinned. "Yeah. But there's one, again, and you're going. Don't you want to see Appledawn? I want to see Honeybee."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Honeybee." I frowned. "Still trying to figure that one out. I know there are honeybees, so that basically means she called Honeybee a ... bee. She's a cat."

"Take that out with Icestar!" Hiveclaw joked.

I mean, I actually could. I was Icestar's granddaughter. Wait, no. I wasn't. My parents were Frogleap and Coriandermist. I still hFluffytail – Fluffypaw again, looked horrified at her demotion.

Goldenwind smiled and touched noses with the horrified-looking apprentice.

Fluffytail – Fluffypaw again, looked horrified at her demotion.

Goldenwind smiled and touched noses with the horrified-looking apprentice.

"Wheatpelt has given birth to two kits," Icestar meowed. "Stormykit and Silverykit."

That, I thought, was a dead giveaway, as everyone's heads suddenly turned to me.

Chapter Twenty-six

"Silverdusk?" Appledawn asked, her mew barely above a whisper. "Are you Stormdawn?"

I almost let out a squeak. Then, ignoring all the stares of the cats everywhere, I turned and fled.

I was faster than everyone. Hiveclaw chased after me but I outpaced him, almost crying now. I didn't know why I was crying, but I knew no one was supposed to know.

I stopped deep in the heart of SeasonClan's forest territory, where everything was familiar. Finally, I stepped in front of the ancient grave of Froststar.

"Why?" I whispered. "Why did you reincarnate me? What is this all for? Why? Is there a point?"

My tears rolled down my cheeks and dripped onto her grave.

"Tell me," I whispered.

Froststar appeared. "Child," she whispered, "I cannot tell you why we brought you back, only you have an important destiny and you kept dying too soon. Silverdusk. Stormdawn. Whoever you are, whoever you were, you are and were too crazy. You sacrifice too much for the cats you love. Stop. It's ... we may even bring you back a third time, if anything happens."

Froststar took a deep breath. "These rogues ... they aren't nothing. Kill them. Get rid of them. Once you do that, Silverdusk, your way forward is clear. We will let you ascend to StarClan as Stormdawn, or you can live the rest of your life out as Silverdusk. With Hiveclaw."

That last option was enticing.

"Alright," I whispered, "I'll finish my destiny. I'll do what you want!"

"Good. I mean, thank you." Froststar spoke warmly. "You don't need to do this, but you are."

"I am," I nodded happily.

"Follow-up that," she said, "by having kits."

"Excuse me, WHAT" I said.

"One of them will have an important destiny," Froststar whispered, then vanished as a breeze blew by.

I was trying to figure that part out, when a SeasonClan cat came. The cat I wanted to see the least. It was Wheatpelt, and she had Silverykit and Stormykit with her.

"That," I meowed, turning to her, "Was a dead giveaway."

Wheatpelt smiled. "I know that. Stormdawn."

I shook my head. "Think what you want. My name is Silverdusk. Now, anyway. Leave me alone."

"But," said Wheatpelt, "one of my daughters is in your Clan."

"Fluffypaw is coming back," I said, smirking as I said the 'paw at the end. "After all, Hiveclaw ditched her."

Wheatpelt frowned.

I turned tail and ran. Back to the river. I needed to swim to get my mind off things. I avoided the Great Oak with the gathering area, and made it to the river quietly. Jumping in, I felt cold. The river was freezing! But soon, it provided the warmth I needed. I paddled around for a short while, relishing the warmth of the river. (For those who have swam before, you will understand)

"Silverdusk? Silverdusk! She's here!"

Twilightgleam and Hiveclaw came. They were looking incredibly relieved.

Twilightgleam smiled. "You just ran off! So, you are Stormdawn, huh?"

I nodded.

She shrugged. "I thought you were too odd to be eight moons. Oh well!"

Wait, that was it?

She didn't care?

I was Stormdawn, the old deputy, and she didn't care?

Twilightgleam was just grinning as usual, like nothing – nothing at all – had changed.

And Hiveclaw. He was still smiling at me. As usual too. But he had known. He'd known two moons back. And Icestar... she had known the longest. But now Wheatpelt knew. She'd named her kits, Silverykit and Stormykit, and no cat would ever forget they were the ones who'd revealed me.

"I ... I had a destiny," I said. "And I kept dying too soon to complete it. And ... Hiveclaw ... they brought me back into this lifetime because they said that one of our kits would have an important destiny."

Hiveclaw's smile turned solemn. "I understand," he said. "But ... I asked you a moon back. You weren't ready."

My grin widened. "Let me finish my destiny first. I'm still eight moons, after all. Maybe wait till I'm ten?"

He just smiled.

~

"Let me get this straight," said Minkfur. "You want to help fight the rogues – which are SeasonClan's problem – and defeat them?"

"We are SeasonClan," I told her. "You are forgetting that.

SeasonClan is not the Clan who lives on the forest and sometimes the moor. SeasonClan is them, and us. We are the river cats, yes, but SeasonClan's territory includes the river. We are SeasonClan too. We were the cats who would be called WinterClan. We're part of this!"

Minkfur sat back, looking slightly disturbed. Mothtail had said nothing this whole conversation, and looked deep in thought. She opened her mouth to speak, then, but closed it almost immediately. Minkfur looked questioningly at her, but all Mothtail did was look sheepish. Some deputy Mothtail is, I thought, thinking about how I would always speak up during a conversation like this, unable to bear the silence. Still, Mothtail wasn't me, and she could do as she liked, although she already seemed to be a poor deputy by my standards. Again, she didn't think like me and I shouldn't judge her.

"Yes," Mothtail whispered, finally.

Minkfur looked up, stared at her, a question in her eyes.

"We are SeasonClan." Mothtail spoke softly. "When we divided, Minkfur – it was Poppyseed who asked us to divide. She's still in the elders. Go and ask her, Minkfur, if we're still SeasonClan or not."

Minkfur stood up, sighing, and headed to the elders' den. I followed her cautiously. What would Poppyseed say? I was inclined to believe she would say we were, but Poppyseed ... basically, I'd never heard her before, so she wasn't one to lash out.

"Are we?" Minkfur was whispering, almost pleading for an answer.

"Minkfur..." Poppyseed rasped. "Minkfur, my daughter. We are SeasonClan. We just live by the river."

Minkfur looked into Poppyseed's eyes and saw her mother was not lying. She got up from the ground where she was kneeling, shook herself, and walked out.

~

"You're joining forces with us, are you?" Icestar asked. "To fight our rogues?"

"Your rogues?" Minkfur asked, disgusted. "Not your rogues. The rogues. They're not yours. Are you claiming them?"

Icestar frowned. "Slip of the tongue. What convinced you? You said nothing at the gathering."

"What convinced me?" asked Minkfur. "No one, of course, but that Stormdawn-spirited Silverdusk. I heard Stormdawn was outspoken."

Was that how I was named now? Stormdawn-spirited Silverdusk? That was too long! Besides, I hated it. I was completely Silverdusk now, and I'd slipped into that personality easily, though giving obviously traces of my past self. I wanted to speak out, scold Minkfur, but they weren't supposed to know I was there.

"Aah." Icestar was smiling now. "Nothing like what I'd expect from my granddaughter. Or is she Frogleap and Coriandermist's daughter? Everything is too confusing now."

That was true. Was I Peacewind and Root's daughter anymore? Or Frogleap and Coriandermist's daughter?

At heart, Peacewind and Root's. In body, Frogleap and Coriandermist's.

GREAT STARCLAN, SO CONFUSING.

~ (I know this is an awkward time skip)

"Right, on the count of three. Do you need to go through the plan again?"

One of the younger warriors, Windbreeze, nodded quickly.

"AGAIN?" Cloudysky asked, exasperated. "I have some kits I need to get back to!"

About two moons back, Leafshine had given birth to his kits. Ironically, he'd named one Stormkit. It was a striped black tom. The she-cat had been named Barbkit, no one knew why. The last tom was Shardkit.

"Um..." said Windbreeze. "I forgot it."

"Play by ear, then!" Cloudysky sighed. "let's GO!"

It was only a practice, of course. I leapt on top of Cloudysky, tackling him. He looked up to me.

"Stormdawn," he said, "I never sparred with you."

"It's Silverdusk," I said, before slapping him across the muzzle, sending him reeling. I recovered myself and jumped atop him, kicking his underbelly harshly. He gasped for air and I threw him over into a pile of moss.

"Hey!" called one of the junior warriors, Skystrike. "I'm on apprentice duties because there are no apprentices except Tawnypaw, and you wrecked my moss!"

"I'm sorry, would you have rather been thrown on the ground, Cloudysky?" I demanded, advancing on him.

He jumped to his paws immediately and dodged me. "No," he meowed. "No! Skystrike just go get summore!"

Skystrike glared at him, but stalked off anyway. I pounced on him when he was staring after her contemptuously and tackled him to the ground again. He almost threw me off him, but I gripped on to his paws and I almost ripped some of his fur out when he threw me. Cloudysky let out a hissing shriek of pain and I saw Leafshine worriedly come out of the nursery.

We were only sparring, and I didn't draw blood. In a real fight, I would've killed Cloudysky by now. Leafshine watched us, looking terrified. It was me, the cat he'd once loved, stealing the cat she'd always loved.

Still, I wasn't stealing him. I was injuring him. Toughening him up.

I finally released him a while later, and he dropped to the ground with a thud. The only words I could spare him were, "Remind me why you're in charge?" before I stalked off.

Immediately, Duskypelt leapt on top of me. But he wasn't there to fight, as he released me almost immediately. "Silverdusk," he whispered. "That's why you understood, on that day. You knew rejection."

"I knew rejection and faking," I whispered. "Plumwhisker for you, Zealheart for me. It ... isn't it awful, after following or being followed by a lover for so long, then you choose someone else and they just dump you like that?"

Duskypelt nodded numbly. "But you have someone now," he whispered. "I don't. You have Hiveclaw."

I shrugged. "Whatevs. Are we fighting?"

He nodded, looking drowsy all the same. I shook my head. No energy, this cat. I bowled him over easily and threatened to throw him into a thornbush.

His eyes hardened. "Do it."

"Serious?" I asked. "It might kill you."

"That's why," he said. "I'm insane, Silverdusk. I was, up until that point when Plumwhisker entered my life, shining and perfect. Naturally, she ditched me for a kittypet. Little Plummy would always love Spiky. She didn't even tell me her name was Plummy, or that the kits weren't even mine. They were Spiky's, and I was stupid enough to believe that striped tom looked like her father."

Duskypelt gave a shuddering sigh. "Throw me, Silverdusk." I shook my head, and he met my eyes. "Throw me, Stormdawn."

Something in me ached to hear my old name, not as a curse directed at me. But still, I could not do that to him. He was in a life full of pain and misery, but true light had not sank in yet. He should stay a little longer, find his love.

"No," I whispered. "Fine someone else to do it. And let me tell you: Only one kind of cat would do it. The cat who loves you enough to let you die. And that cat ... when you do find a cat, who isn't throwing you out of spite, it's the cat who you should be with,

Duskypelt."

Chapter Twenty-seven

Duskypelt stared back for a few seconds more. Then he shrugged and threw himself at the thornbush. I caught him and dumped him back on the ground.

"Stop it," I told him. "One day, you'll find love. Or you'll mean something. Would you seriously kill yourself now?"

"Do you know what went unannounced at the gathering?" Duskypelt whispered hoarsely.

I shook my head. If it was unannounced, obviously I wouldn't know.

"Deaths," Duskypelt whispered. "Deaths from the rogue raids. We've already lost Firespring, Shadowheart, Spidertail, Sunnyheart, Mistfur, Iceflight and Darkwind."

Firespring and Shadowheart, his parents. Spidertail ... Sunbright would be devastated. They'd lost almost all their kits at one point, but now Littlecloud was back, but Minnowpelt was still gone. Sunnyheart and Mistfur, Duskypelt's sisters. Poor him. No wonder life wasn't appealing anymore. Iceflight ... the rogues had killed a medicine cat? Iceflight ... Iceland. She was the one who had trained Songbird – Singapore. She was one of those CountryClan cats. Had she come here, only to get a weird name and die?

Duskypelt motioned for me to go. "I need to be alone now," he murmured. "And ... maybe you weren't the cat for me, even if I loved you for a long time."

"I don't think I was, either," I whispered back. "I never loved you. I'm so sorry, but I really, really never loved you."

"Okay..." whispered Duskypelt sadly.

I left him there. I went to fight some more, because I wasn't in the

mood to stop there. I was a fighter.

Leafshine challenged me. Apparently, queens were practicing to fight too, even though Leafshine was still nursing. Her three kits – what were their names again I think it was Stormkit, Barbkit and Shardkit – they watched at the side, if only with their squirrel-brained pathetic warrior father.

Leafshine eyed me. "Shall we begin?" she asked testily.

"We may begin," I said with a grim smile, "whenever you feel ready."

A determined line set on Leafshine's jaw. "Well, obviously," she said, "that's now."

To be truthful, she did make the first move. But to be even more truthful, I was faster. I dodged her like a bullet and snaked my way behind her, smacking her hard in the back. Leafshine gasped, winded even from that, and I flung her backwards into the same pile of moss. Skystrike, who had just returned with new moss, rolled her eyes and brought her moss pile away from the fighting area. I honestly couldn't blame her. Anyway, she was doing moss with her sister, Fluffypaw. I'd never get tired of calling former Fluffytail Fluffypaw again.

I edged around Leafshine's fallen form. She wasn't moving, but that was a trick. So, I had to trick her more. I pretended to relax, and Leafshine sprung. Obviously, I was ready for her and caught her paw. I swung her around and threw her into the moss again. Leafshine rolled over, groaning, but she was in no shape to fight me again.

"Do you forfeit?" I asked her crisply, like a fair opponent.

Leafshine nodded weakly.

Cloudysky took their kits back to the nursery first, and Leafshine leaned over to me. "Do you still love him?" she asked me quietly, her voice pained. "He still loves you." She looked over to where her mate was quietly watching with their kits. "He never, ever forgot

you. Your death broke him. Is that all? Now you come back? Is he yours again?"

"I don't know," I confessed truthfully. "But I can tell you one thing, Leafshine. I never loved him. He might have loved me, but I never loved him. If he loves you, I'm also with Hiveclaw. We've both moved on."

"That gathering," she said. "You were so bothered by everyone knowing who you are. And you haven't spoken to Appledawn since."

"I ..." I shook my head. I didn't understand my silence from Appledawn, really couldn't comprehend it. "It's not that. She's been avoiding me." That was true. Appledawn had been hanging around Browntail a lot more. I mean, he was her mate, so that wasn't wrong, but she was hanging around him a lot more than she used to, and Great StarClan – sometimes I saw her with tear tracks on her face.

"Talk to her," Leafshine encouraged. "You don't even know why she's doing that, do you? Well, she's Cloudysky's sister and I treat her like my sister. But she's shut me out too. You should talk to her."

"Why would I talk to her if I'm the source of the trouble?" I asked flatly.

"She's guilty," meowed Leafshine. "She asked you if you were Stormdawn, and that started the whole thing."

"She's guilty, so what? Apologize. You know what, even if she didn't apologize, I've already forgiven her. Life moves on. Is she clinging on?" I demanded, annoyance building inside of me. I wasn't this hot-tempered as Stormdawn, was I? Actually, was I? I think I was. Deep down, this – Silverdusk – she was still me. I'm her.

"Talk to her," whispered Leafshine, and then she withdrew back to Cloudysky.

I looked over my shoulder. Appledawn was sitting, looking

downcast and staring at the ground, Browntail's tail on her shoulder. She was crying. Again. Seriously. This was the Appledawn that had once been a renowned fighter in the Clan? Reduced to this crying mess after she'd had her kits? That seemed wrong. So, so wrong.

"Appledawn," I called.

The tears stopped flowing and the stare she faced me with was full of hope.

"Do you want to go hunting?" I asked.

"J-just you and m-m-me?" she stammered hoarsely.

I shrugged. "Who else would come anyway? If it's me in the question?"

Her face crumpled with worry. "Silverdusk, you mustn't speak like that! Cats don't hate you because you're Stormdawn!"

"They don't love me either," I responded flatly. "And I was the once-loved deputy, wasn't I? But now? Tossed aside like a ragdoll. Doesn't really make sense, does it? They're avoiding me. But I didn't think you would too."

Appledawn started, and Browntail moved between us. "Don't say that to her," he snarled angrily, advancing on me. "Appledawn brought you up as her own, and this is how you treat her?"

"By asking simple questions?" I demanded. "I don't answer to you, Browntail. You didn't really bring me up. She did, and if she's angry at me, I'll accept it. But I won't accept this kind of fox-dung from you."

Appledawn got to her feet. "Don't say that to him," she whispered. "He means well."

"He does, doesn't he?" I asked. "O wonderful Browntail? You know what, never mind. I'm sure Twilightgleam wouldn't turn down a hunt." I whipped around and walked off.

Really. Instead of trying to cool Browntail off, Appledawn takes his side? I mean, I lashed out. But not really. Browntail lashed out more, protectively of Appledawn, of course, but since when did Appledawn want to be protected? What had happened to that firesome warrior inside of her? The Appledawn I had liked as Stormdawn, come to love as Silverdusk? I had to ask Goldenwind. She was Appledawn's best friend – was. I hadn't seen them together in a long time.

Fluffypaw was collecting moss, so Goldenwind should be free. I approached her.

"Silverdusk. Or would you rather I called you Stormdawn?" she asked. It was obviously supposed to be light teasing, but I didn't like this kind of snark.

"Silverdusk does fine," I said. "What's going on with Appledawn, by the way?"

"You really are accepting her as your mother?" asked Goldenwind softly. "Your mother is there, Silverdusk. She's right there, and she thought in your second lifetime you'd give her a chance."

"She trained Duckstep," I meowed, "and Icestar almost gave me permanently to him as his apprentice. Duckstep is stupid."

"This isn't about Duckstep, Silverdusk," Goldenwind meowed gently. "This part – it's about Peacewind."

"She understands my life choices," I told Goldenwind.

The golden-furred deputy gave a long sigh. "Very well. There's nothing wrong with Appledawn as far as I can tell. But she is depressed. She ... she feels she has wronged you, and is not sure how to make up. She is also very close to breaking up with Browntail. He wants more kits and she wants to be a warrior again. Don't get me wrong. Appledawn loves Dawnmist, Chiveleaf and Twilightgleam. But she doesn't want to be in the nursery for another long seven moons."

I nodded understandingly. That had been me, trapped as a kit.

Only, I knew I couldn't do anything. Appledawn could be the warrior she wanted to be. I couldn't have been anyway.

Goldenwind dismissed me after that for her duties. I felt envious. Those duties of hers used to be mine, and she'd stolen – wait, no – taken them. It isn't her fault, I reminded myself. Icestar chose the post for her. Of deputy. She didn't reject, but why would she?

I went back to the river camp. That day, only myself, Windbreeze and Emberblaze had come from the river cats, and they were both keen to get back to Mothtail and Blazespark. I wanted to get back to Hiveclaw.

"You're fast!" Windbreeze commented shyly.

Emberblaze looked at his son. "Flirting, Windbreeze? She's mated."

Windbreeze looked even shier now, but I didn't say anything. He ... shouldn't have feelings for me. No, that would make a fifth cat. Although the other three had already dumped me, save Hiveclaw.

Cloudysky and Leafshine, Zealheart and Glitterspark. As well as ... Duskypelt and Plumwhisker. But they weren't together anymore.

"I ... uh..." Windbreeze started awkwardly. "Sorry," he finished in a mumble.

I smiled kindly at him. "It's fine," I murmured. "I know what it's like to love someone who's already with someone else." My feelings for Zealheart obviously hadn't evaporated. Every time I came to SeasonClan camp and saw him with Glitterspark, smiling happily – Glitterspark, my sister – I was so, so ... overwhelmed. With sadness. I was with Hiveclaw, but I had wanted to be with Zealheart. For some time, at least.

Instead of any form of comforting, Emberblaze just rolled his eyes at Windbreeze. Some father that cat was. What did Twilightgleam see in him anyway? I couldn't place her feelings for Emberblaze when he was with Mothtail, and had Blazespark and Windbreeze as their kits.

We got back to camp alright, and Hiveclaw and Blazespark

immediately came to greet us.

"Hi Emberblaze! Hi Windbreeze!" Blazespark greeted eagerly.

"Hi Silverdusk," Hiveclaw meowed, a little more shyly. "How was battle practice?"

"Oh, Silverdusk totally demolished everyone," Windbreeze bragged for me. Hiveclaw frowned at him and Emberblaze and Blazespark elbowed him at the same time. Blazespark grinned at Emberblaze, who didn't crack a smile.

"What's up with him?" Hiveclaw asked when we were away from them.

I shrugged. "Suddenly revealing hidden feelings for me. It doesn't matter. I'm yours, and I'd never have it any other way."

Hiveclaw smiled, moving in to cuddle me. I moved away. "I will not be cuddled," I meowed, in my haughtiest voice possible. Hiveclaw just grinned, but he let me have some personal space.

"Despite your ... snark," he meowed, "I'll still consider you one of the nicest cats I've met."

"One of them?" I asked idly.

"The others being Starrynight and Honeybee," He told me. I heaved an inward sigh of relief. "Dogspring is ... nice, but not the you know ... nice."

"That doesn't make sense," I said with a laugh.

Hiveclaw shrugged. He shrugged, like that, for the next ten seconds. I raised my eyebrows at him.

"What's with the continuous shrugging?"

"Nothing," he said defensively, but he was grinning.

"Are you going to fight the rogues?" I asked him. "You haven't really been coming to the practice sessions."

"I don't know," Hiveclaw confessed. "I don't really want to, honestly. I know Starrynight, Dogspring and Honeybee aren't fighting. Why do you have to fight?"

I faced him with a determined stare. "It's my destiny."

Hiveclaw sighed, staring at the ground once more. He evidently didn't like the prospect of me being in danger, but hey, we were in danger every day. I'd even risked my life for him once.

"So ... you are fighting?" Hiveclaw finally asked in a small voice.

I nodded crisply. "No changing it."

He sighed, again. "If you're fighting, I have to fight too."

"You don't need to," I told him softly.

Hiveclaw only sighed again.

Chapter Twenty-eight

"Today is the day of the battle," Icestar announced loudly. "I want three separate patrols. The first shall be led by Silverdusk."

I lifted my head high. She hadn't chosen me because of Silverdusk's experience, but Stormdawn's, but I was okay with that. She trusted me. Actually, she always had.

"Silverdusk, on your patrol you will take Leafshine, Cloudysky, Appledawn, Woodfur, and Amberfire."

"Leafshine?" I asked. "Is that wise?"

"Cloudysky will look after her," Icestar promised, looking ... contented with my concern.

"Goldenwind will lead the second patrol. Goldenwind, you'll take Duskypelt, Browntail, Sunbright, Wormtail, Windbreeze and Lightmist. The third patrol will be led by myself. I will take Hollowmist, Mothtail, Minkfur, Eveningprimrose and Emberblaze. The medicine cats will follow one group each respectively. Blazespark will follow Silverdusk's group, Songbird will follow Goldenwind's and Honeybee will follow mine. Emuwing, you will remain here. Any remaining warriors will also stay here. Cocoadust, if anything happens, I want you to assist Emuwing."

Cocoadust nodded eagerly, sitting up straighter. I could see she really, really longed to be a medicine cat again, but as Cyprusbark's tail twined with hers, she gave a sad smile.

Emuwing sighed. "I have the most experience, Icestar. Surely you should be sending me and not ... Honeybee."

Honeybee immediately looked outraged. "I'm experienced!" she whispered, almost sounding hurt by Emuwing's words. Emuwing shook her head decisively.

"You don't have battle training," Emuwing snapped. "If anything happens, Honeybee, you're as good as dead. The same goes for Songbird. I think you should send me and Cocoadust."

"Cocoadust is a warrior!" Cypressbark yelled at her in annoyance. Cocoadust gently rested her tail on his shoulder, and he took a step back.

"Cocoadust may be a warrior," meowed Emuwing, "But she has all the skillset of a medicine cat, plus fighting training from Cyprusbark. She can help, much more than Honeybee or Songbird. They're both accomplished medicine cats, but if any rogue gets to them, they're dead."

Icestar instinctively looked to me and not Goldenwind. I almost gave a yelp of surprise, but instead calmly nodded to her. Goldenwind watched from the side, a hurt and annoyed expression forming on her face. I shrugged apologetically at her, but Goldenwind wasn't looking at me anymore.

"Alright, let's head out!" Icestar meowed in a cross whisper.

I flicked my tail for my group. Leafshine, Cloudysky, Appledawn, Woodfur, and Amberfire followed me immediately. Blazespark trailed behind, carrying herbs like they were his life.

He spat some onto the ground. "I can't carry it all," he meowed. "I need some help."

I immediately looked to Leafshine.

She gave a huff. "I want to fight!"

"You will fight," I assured her. "Just help Blazespark first."

Cloudysky shot me a grateful glance, then proceeded to help Leafshine and Blazespark with the herbs.

Apparently, Icestar had sent Glitterspark to join our patrol because she appeared a moment later while Leafshine was bending down to pick up the marigold.

"Glitterspark?" I demanded, my voice hard and cold.

"Shush!" she snapped. "Don't be so angry! All I did was love you!"

I rolled my eyes at her and stared flatly at her.

Glitterspark rolled her eyes back and followed my patrol. I wasn't that willing to have her along, but I wouldn't defy Icestar. That was something I could not do, no matter what.

We approached the rogues' camp from the rear. I motioned for Appledawn and Woodfur. They both came forward, and I assigned them watchtowers. Well, not really towers, obviously, but vantage points. Appledawn got a tall redwood tree, which was shorter than the Great Redwood but still tall. Woodfur climbed a tree.

Soon, they gave the 'all-clear' sign, and we crept into the rogues' camp. I caught the sentry off-guard. He had a – ugh – a collar. His name was Marty, which sounded like a soft kittypet name, but he fought surprisingly well, even caught off-guard. He managed to get in a series of wheel kicks that hit Cloudysky and he dropped his horsetail in shock. Blazespark quickly gathered them. The soft marshy ground of the rogues' camp was not good for herbs.

Marty glared back at us. "What t' hall do y'think you're doin'?" he demanded furiously.

"T' hall?" I mused. "Great StarClan, what kind of phrase is that?"

Marty frowned. "Maybe it was hole," he said thoughtfully.

I gave a cry of exasperation, and slit his throat. Even facing off an enemy as me, he still allowed himself to get tricked by his own play of words. T' hall? Or t' hole? What kind of expression was that? Dark Forest! It was probably supposed to be "the hell".

We got inside, past the dead sentry and into their camp. I saw Icestar's patrol entering by the front entrance. They were intercepted. Meanwhile, my patrol destroyed their herb supplies. Blazespark took whatever herbs he deemed useful from there, but they also kept things like deathberries in their stocks. He had fun stepping on those and splashing deathberry juice into their

medicine cat's eyes. Blazespark wasn't supposed to be violent, but he was grinning with glee as their medicine cat howled.

The medicine cat had a collar too, but his wasn't so kittypet-like. It was a wrap of leaves with a name in it obviously carved by a stick on a piece of bark attached. His name was Herbivore. What kind of name was that?

I ripped his collar off, disgusted, but that proved to make him angry. He lunged for me, and Blazespark's latest blob of deathberry juice missed him. Blazespark cursed under his breath. He couldn't spray any more deathberry juice without risk of hitting me.

I threw his collar into his face, and the splintery bark got splinters into his eyes. Herbivore howled in pain, his eyes turning pinkish-red, but no blood came out. He might be blinded, though. Just from splinters. I smiled evilly at him. Behind me, Appledawn, Woodfur, Amberfire Leafshine and Cloudysky completely destroyed the rogues' supply of herbs.

I barely saw Herbivore's grin before he kicked Nightshade at Leafshine. Her mouth was open, for some reason, and it went in. Leafshine choked and swallowed it.

"LEAFSHINE!" Blazespark bellowed, running over. "Where is yarrow – where is yarrow!"

"We don't have yarrow," Herbivore meowed with an evil grin. "And I'm guessing you didn't bring any, either."

"No – no – no!" Blazespark whispered, trying to force his paw down Leafshine's throat and almost choking her in the process. He quickly withdrew his paw. Even without his paw there, Leafshine was looking more sickly by the minute. Then, she collapsed onto the ground.

"Leafshine!" whispered Cloudysky, horrified.

While he was distracted in his mourning, Herbivore lunged for him. I couldn't reach the rogues' wily medicine cat in time before he ripped open Cloudysky's throat. He probably got Cloudysky's

windpipe because his face turned blue and his eyes glazed over only moments later.

"All attack him NOW!" I bellowed. Why had the other two continued ransacking Herbivore's herbs while he murdered Cloudysky and Leafshine?

Appledawn and Woodfur joined forces with me and Blazespark immediately and we managed to overpower Herbivore. As his eyes glazed over like Cloudysky's, he smiled.

"I – urk – killed two of you," Herbivore rasped. "That's an accomplishment." Then he died, and I wished I'd made his death a thousand times more painful. Stormkit, Barbkit and Shardkit were orphans now, and I doubted Wheatpelt would dote on them like she did with Stormykit and Silverykit.

I sadly looked at the two bodies of those orphaned kits' parents, before leaping into the battle in the clearing. Goldenwind's group was there, attacking the rogues head-on. I joined them, my paws skimming the ground as I ran. I engaged in a battle with another collared rogue – Jaguar – and he was the fastest of them all, a match for me. It had been a long time since my opponents had been challenging, but Jaguar was that. I was relying on my enhanced senses to hear every move he made, from the tiniest swish of his claws to the full-scale ramming me into the ground. We were blurs of golden and silver, almost looking royal as we fought. Had there been time, and had they been free, I was sure all the rogues and Clan cats would have abandoned their fights just to watch those royal blurs zipping around the clearing.

Jaguar was growing frustrated, and he was fatiguing. I had more stamina than him, obviously, but not by much, and running so fast was draining us quickly. He chased me around the clearing. I jumped, kicked off one of their dens and slammed my claws into his face, but he was gone and I barely nicked his tail. Infuriated, I chased him, and our fight was a game of cat and mouse as we took turns chasing each other around their camp.

Finally, he stopped running and whipped around, engaging me in a fight. I almost smiled as I fought him. This was the way to hone my

skills, to improve. By fighting Jaguar. He was a challenge, challenging as I'd never experienced before. He was hard, but that was fun. He was a match for me, and I actually had no idea what the outcome would be. Would I be the first to die or would he? I had no idea.

Finally, Jaguar just fell. He was too fatigued, had no energy left to chase me and fight me. I cocked my head as he dropped to the ground, energy gone, weak and exposed.

"Thank you," I told him softly. "That was a good fight, and I haven't had a good fight in long years."

Then, because he had fatigued me back, I slit his throat and bid him farewell to the Dark Forest.

I saw Appledawn struggling with her slow attacker, and I almost fainted. Was this the renowned fighter? Goldenwind was living up to her name, also a snaking golden blur as she rushed through opponent after opponent, but her gaze was almost pitying as she regarded the struggling Appledawn. She nodded to me, and I leapt in to help her. I dispatched the rogue easily.

"What is that?" I demanded of Appledawn. "You're a renowned fighter."

"I was," she meowed in a small, weak voice. "Not anymore. I ... you broke me, Silverdusk."

"Why would I break you?" I hissed.

"Because ... because you were my daughter, and then you left. And you took my daughter with you. And ... and ..." She was crying now, in an enemy camp, crying.

"Stop," I told her. "Whatever you did to me, I forgive you. And however I wronged you, will you forgive me?"

She nodded weakly.

"Then let's fight."

Appledawn grinned, her jaw set in a determined line. She and I fought back-to-back.

But she dropped when she saw Browntail die, and that almost cost me my life. I only ducked Snake's blow because I heard the whizzing of his claws. After that, I had to dodge Salamander's, too. Snake and Salamander were brothers and identical. Well, I assumed they were brothers. Appledawn cowered on the ground, and I was forced to protect her from any intruders. I had to kill Snake and Salamander, and then bend down.

"You have to fight!" I hissed at her.

"He ... he died," Appledawn whispered, petrified. "He was there .... And ... Browntail ... he's gone."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Browntail's brown form crumpled against a den and shook myself. "Regardless, Appledawn, my point stands. Fight, or leave." I turned back to the battle and dashed over to assist Goldenwind with a huge tom. He bared yellowish fangs at us, and I reeled backwards in disgust.

"Hold your ground!" Goldenwind yowled, and we took him together, royal blurs again, only with a different golden blur. We attacked him – Mumu – quickly and precisely. Mumu was big and strong, but not the fastest. We were both wily, and got around him easily. I slashed at his spine and Goldenwind got his eyes. He was screaming in pain within moments.

"Help!" I heard a terrified cry from below me, and didn't dare to look.

I didn't even want to look.

That cry was Glitterspark's, but she'd stolen everything I wanted. Zealheart, and Peacewind's love. I didn't want either anymore, but she had taken them, regardless.

And ... she wasn't my sister anymore. My only connection to her was Clanmate. So, she could wait until I killed Mumu with Goldenwind. Her shrieks and cries were getting shriller, but even

Goldenwind ignored her, focused on blinding Mumu for me to get a solid hit on his chest. If I left now, Goldenwind would die. And she was far more valuable to the Clan than Glitterspark.

Glitterspark fell cold with a thud. I heard and saw her fall, but didn't care. I managed to slit Mumu's throat, finally, and Goldenwind kicked off his body and back into the fight. I had to admire her boundless energy. I joined her, in that moment. And we were one.

Chapter Twenty-nine

"We won," I meowed breathlessly.

Icestar nodded, wincing. "Everyone report casualties and deaths. From my group, Hollowmist and Emberblaze are dead, and Mothtail is in critical condition."

Emberblaze. That would hit Mothtail, Windbreeze and Blazespark. And Hollowmist's death would hit Lightmist and ... would it hit Swanflutter?

"No deaths from my group," Goldenwind reported. "However, Windbreeze is in shock."

"Glitterspark, Cloudysky and Leafshine are dead from my group," I reported. "I told you sending Leafshine was a bad idea. Appledawn is badly injured and Woodfur and Amberfire are ... slightly injured. Blazespark is quite in shock, but is keeping himself busy."

"Both of them?" Icestar meowed sorrowfully. "Those three kits are orphans now. And so many mated. Glitterspark can't bear Zealheart's kits anymore. Lightmist... she was planning to have a third litter. Since Tawnypaw is... apprenticed."

Oh, Tawnypaw. I'd forgotten about that annoying furball. I hadn't really seen her around camp anyway.

We got back to SeasonClan camp and Tawnypaw greeted us. "Where's my father?" she asked tautly.

"Dead," I replied.

Tawnypaw took a step back. "That's not true. It can't be. Mom's alone."

"She still has you, Duckstep and Fallowmist," I meowed.

"St-still!" Tawnypaw gasped. Oakbark came out of camp and put his

tail around her shoulders. Did he like her? How could any cat like her? Oakbark wasn't the most sensible cat, but still.

Lilypool watched her only remaining brother, disgust glittering in her eyes.

Zealheart burst out of camp. "What about Glitterspark?" he demanded. "Glitterspark? Glitterspark!"

He had just caught sight of Glitterspark's body, carried between Woodfur and Amberfire.

Browntail's body was also carried, and Appledawn was severely injured and still crying. Songbird and Honeybee came out to help with the casualties. Emuwing and Cocoadust were also fatigued, and Blazespark was in shock, so the two were the only working medicine cats.

"We need to head back to the river cats," Minkfur announced. "Daisyleaf will need to see to our injured. Silverdusk, would you mind carrying Emberblaze?"

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled, bending down to pick up Emberblaze.

"Blazespark, Windbreeze, help Mothtail back to camp," Minkfur instructed. "That's all of us river cats."

Together, the six of us trudged back to camp. I couldn't wait to see Hiveclaw and Twilightgleam and tell them about our fight.

We got back, and the camp was eerily silent.

Poppyseed came out of the elders' den. "You're back!" she gasped.

And then the camp exploded with noise. Everyone came out of their dens and everyone welcomed us back. They quieted, though, once they caught sight of Emberblaze's body.

"My son!" whispered Darkmoon, moving over to him. "I already lost Brightgleam, why must you go too?" Brightgleam must've been his mate.

Hiveclaw moved over to his former mentor, but Darkmoon shooed him. "She's there," he hissed. "Your mate is there! Go to her."

I smiled as Hiveclaw ran over to me, beaming. "You're fine!" he gasped.

"I was a blur," I told him.

"She was fast. Told you," Windbreeze meowed.

Hiveclaw narrowed his eyes at Windbreeze. "She's mine," he scolded.

Windbreeze only grinned, then looked sadder as his father's body was laid in the clearing and his mother was carted off to the medicine den.

Epilogue #1

"Aren't they beautiful?" I whispered, watching the two kits nestled at my belly.

"They're gorgeous," Hiveclaw agreed. "But they're both she-cats..."

"Hush, you!" I elbowed him. "I worked hard to bring them into this world."

"'Course you did," he agreed drowsily.

My kitting had been through the night, so everyone was tired. Twilightgleam had stayed up to help, even though she was expecting Windbreeze's kits. She was odd in that way – she'd fallen in love with Windbreeze's father, and then she'd moved on, ever so easily, to his son.

"Let's name them," I murmured.

"Sure thing," Hiveclaw meowed with a wink at me.

"List the names we thought of."

"Well, there's that one who looks like you. Stormykit," Hiveclaw decided.

I rolled my eyes at him. "We did not discuss that, and there's already a Stormypaw and a Stormpaw in with the forest cats."

Hiveclaw shrugged.

"Rainkit," I decided.

Grudgingly, Hiveclaw nodded. "I liked Stormykit, though."

"Shush, you!" I smacked him teasingly, and he grinned.

"And the other one?" He looked over at the black and yellow tom.

"She looks like me. Let's call her Hiveykit."

"Hivey is not a word," I meowed decisively, "and we are not naming her Hiveykit. How about ... Lightningkit?"

"You bet," he said, with another grin.

"Yay, Lightningkit!" I meowed happily but drowsily.

My head dropped to the ground from weariness, I only got out seven words before falling asleep.

"Welcome to the world, Rainkit andLightningkit."

Epilogue #2

"Your decision is made?" Frostar asked.

"Yes," I meowed. I was dreaming, but wasn't I always dreaming nowadays. Although, Rainkit certainly dreamed more than me. "I want to stay Silverdusk."

"Very well," Frostar meowed, smiling.

"Goodbye, Silverdusk."

Closing note

I'm sorry to say that The Dark Path has come to an end. It was a joy writing it, but I do think we need some new perspective.

There WILL be a sequel to this! It will be called A Brighter Future, and I'll start writing it in a few days or so. Maybe tomorrow.

The next book will be written in third person POV. I'm just a bit tired of writing 'I', and in a few of my chapters I kept writing something like "Stormpaw said" and then was forced to edit it. A Brighter Future will have Silverdusk, but she will no longer be the main character. The main character will be Silverdusk's daughter, Rainkit.

I will try to make this series a trilogy, but I don't have any plans past A Brighter Future. (Because, unfortunately, I don't plan my books.)

I hope you enjoyed reading!

Wow, we reached a whopping 540! (I know based on looking at other books that this isn't much, but it IS a major milestone for me) Thanks so much!!!